

# EFL Learning and Self-identity Development: A Case Study

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**Abstract:** This 2-year qualitative study examined the EFL learning and self-identity development of three college students from a university in Beijing, China. Data collected included interview transcripts, field notes of observations, participants' Internet postings, participants' academic works, and so on. Giddens' theory of reflexivity of self-identity was adopted as a theoretical framework. Norton's theory of investment was also used in the case analysis. Results revealed that EFL learners constructed multiple identities in their multiple investments, which represented their ambivalent desires in learning and using English; EFL learners could monitor their learning process reflexively and exercise agency in drawing on different resources selectively to construct their ideal identities; unintended consequences were produced by learners' acts, which in turn served as conditions of their further acts.

**Keywords:** EFL Learning, Self-identity Development, Qualitative Study

## 1. Introduction

“Self-identity”, which is a term originally used in psychology, has become a recurrent topic in second/foreign language (L2) research, and has long been a basic issue in actual L2 learning—that is, who the learner is when starting to learn the L2, during the process of learning, and when using the L2 and who he or she will become with the development of L2 competence (Gao, Jia, Zhou, 2015).

In social psychological theory, it has been widely recognized that language learning can produce not only linguistic outcome, such as improved proficiency in terms of language skills, but also non-linguistic outcome, among which is the important part of self-identity change in language learners. Many scholars both home and abroad have endeavored to conceptualize the relationship between self-identity and language learning, such as Lambert (1974), Norton (1995), and Gao (2001). Empirical studies in this field are booming in recent two decades (Gao et al., 2004, 2021; Block, 2007, Bian, 2022, to name just a few).

All of these studies have shed light on the understanding of EFL learning and self-identity development both theoretically and empirically[1-5].

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Investment

The concept of investment in language learning proposed by Norton (1995) signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it (Norton, 2001: 10).

According to Norton (1995, 2006), an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own identity, which is constantly changing across time and space.

### 2.2 Giddens' Reflexivity of Self-Identity

Giddens defines self-identity as “the self as reflexively understood by the individual in terms of his or her biography” (1991: 244), which attaches great importance to individual agency. According to Giddens, agents are actors who have knowledge and ability to monitor their own actions reflexively, and agency refers to their capability of doing so in the first place. In his structuration theory (1984), which features “the duality of structure”, Giddens proposes the stratification model of the agent (1984: 5), as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

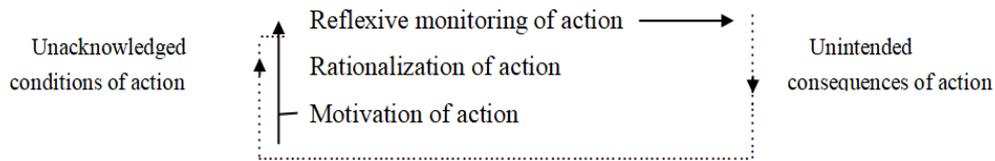


Figure 1: The stratification model of the agent

Based on Giddens’ structuration theory, Macintosh and Scapens (1990: 459) represent agency in structuration as follows.

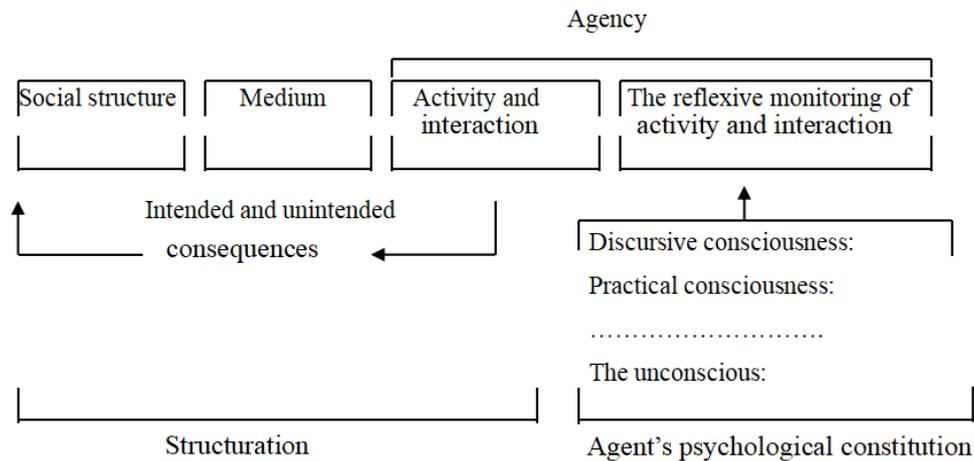


Figure 2: The stratification model of the agent

Although Giddens is not particularly concerned with self-identity and language learning per se, his theory provides us with a framework for understanding the inextricable link between human agency and social institutions (Hall, 2002: 37), and has been gradually brought into the research of EFL learning (Gao, 2006; Jia & Niu, 2016)[6-8].

The present study, which lasted 2 years, aimed to examine the EFL learning and self-identity development of three college students in a comprehensive university in China. The research question was: During the two years of undergraduate English learning, what kind of identity development, if any, did the students experience and how did they exercise agency?

### 3. Methodology

The participants in the present study were three college students in a comprehensive university in China. They were invited to participate in the study in the first semester of their junior year on a voluntary basis, and were informed to be free to withdraw during the study. They accepted the invitation willingly and stayed through the study. Pseudonyms were given to protect their privacy.

#### 3.1 Data Collection

For each participant, a series of 4 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Chinese, one at the end of each semester on the following major themes:

EFL learning experiences over the semester, feelings about the English learning process, attitudes towards English and English learning, future expectations regarding English learning and use, experiences with and attitudes towards recent cultural activities and events, sense of self as related to English learning, and difference of the above aspects as compared with the previous semester(s).

Classroom observations were conducted and participants’ Internet postings and academic works were collected as supplementary data [9-12].

#### 3.2 Data Analysis

For the collected interview data, an analysis by means of a “grounded” approach was conducted to

sort out categories of identity development through time. Data of different sources were compared and integrated.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Linda's Story

#### 4.1.1 A Pragmatic EFL Learner

Linda was a pragmatic EFL learner. Compared with the courses concerning English literature, she liked the “practical courses” more, such as English Listening and Speaking, which could improve her communicative skills, because she thought communication was “the primary purpose” of learning a foreign language, and also “the most important one”. Speaking and learning English well could give her a sense of achievement.

*‘I’m not the kind of ‘literary young man’ and was not interested in the ‘empty literary stuff’. ...For communication skills, I may spare no effort to improve them, however difficult it is. I have a sense of achievement if I can do it well’ (Interview, 3, II<sup>1</sup>).*

She was fond of *syntax*, which enabled her to enjoy “the magic in language”. The course of *Language and Culture* also impressed her a lot.

*You know, I am quite interested in cross-cultural communication and luckily this course could explain the obstacles lying in it. Before taking this course, I just know about the existence of these obstacles. This course could offer me something more theoretical and academic. ... (Interview, 3, II)*

Linda was also pragmatic in terms of courses selection. When talking about the selection of optional courses, she said she adopted the principle of “being economical and practical”. For example, she chose the course of *Language and Culture* as mentioned above largely because it could help her understand the obstacles she may come across in international communication, which was very “practical”. She was reluctant to choose a literary course because it was not “economical” in terms of workload.

#### 4.1.2 An Active Intercultural Communicator

Linda's interest in intercultural communication was a line running through her investments both in courses work and in extracurricular activities, through which she constructed an identity of an active intercultural communicator.

She was found “very attentive and active” in the classes concerning cultural communication.

*The lecture today is about people's attitudes toward different cultures, which seems very interesting to her. She kept taking notes and actively responding to the teacher's questions. (Class observation, 3, I)*

During her undergraduate study, she once took part in several international exchange programs, during which she came to know about another culture and also experienced culture shock. Cultural shock was “unpleasant” but also “offered her an opportunity to enrich the cultural experience”. Instead of being frightened, she became even more active in understanding and overcoming the communicative obstacles.

Speaking of cultural differences, Linda said that the more international exchange programs she attended and the more foreigners she socialized with, the closer she was to Chinese culture. Her attitude towards foreign cultures turned from “admiring, or even worshipping foreign cultures” to that “they (different cultures) are equal”:

*In the past, I may sort of admire, or even worship things in foreign cultures, but since I came to English Department, after having learned so much and having done so much, I have realized that cultures actually share a common nature in many aspects. That is, they are all equal. You are supposed to treat them equal. A foreign culture is no rare thing at all. Through systematic studies, you may sense and enjoy its beauty and the enrichment it brings to your mind. All of this actually has no boundaries between nations. (Interview, 4, I)*

#### 4.1.3 An internationalized language user

As she learned more in English Department, Linda came to find that learning English made her “more internationalized”, which can be seen partly from her habit of inserting English or French words

<sup>1</sup>3 refers to the junior year; II refers to the second semester.

when speaking Chinese.

*I find myself more and more used to speaking and writing English. It's most obvious when you find yourself inserting English words when speaking Chinese. That is, like code-mixing, sometimes when I cannot find a way to express a specific thing in Chinese, I can come up with the English counterpart. Although my English is not good enough to entirely express my feelings, having some English phrases inserted in Chinese could express my inner mind better. It's a way they work together, just like some English adverbs or phrases inserted in Chinese sentences. (Interview, 3, II)*

The large frequency of code-mixing or code-switching in the interviews and her journals online could serve as a triangulation. The following two excerpts were from her two journals online, which were written basically in Chinese, with words in bold inserted in English or French[13-15].

*It was the only **city tour** for me yesterday, since I was about to go back to China. Instead of going sightseeing, I went directly to Asakasa and Shibuya because of the **shopping** tasks given by my dear friends. **Shopping is the theme of my city tour, which is actually very delightful for me.** Nothing more. A lesson was learned: **Credit card is EVIL!** (Online journal, 3, II)*

*This November will be tightly scheduled for me. I have to fight for my future. I know there must be many depressing moments and hesitating days and nights awaiting me, just as I know hard work not necessarily leads to satisfactory result. **C'est la vie.** However, the struggle between success and failure makes me feel that **I am alive.** (Online journal, 4, I)*

As shown in the two excerpts above, English and French for her were two resources she drew upon to express herself. What's more, Linda herself was aware of this tendency in using code-mixing to express herself, and could reflect upon the reasons of doing so, which indicated her agency in the reflexive monitoring of her learning process.

#### 4.1.4 Summary

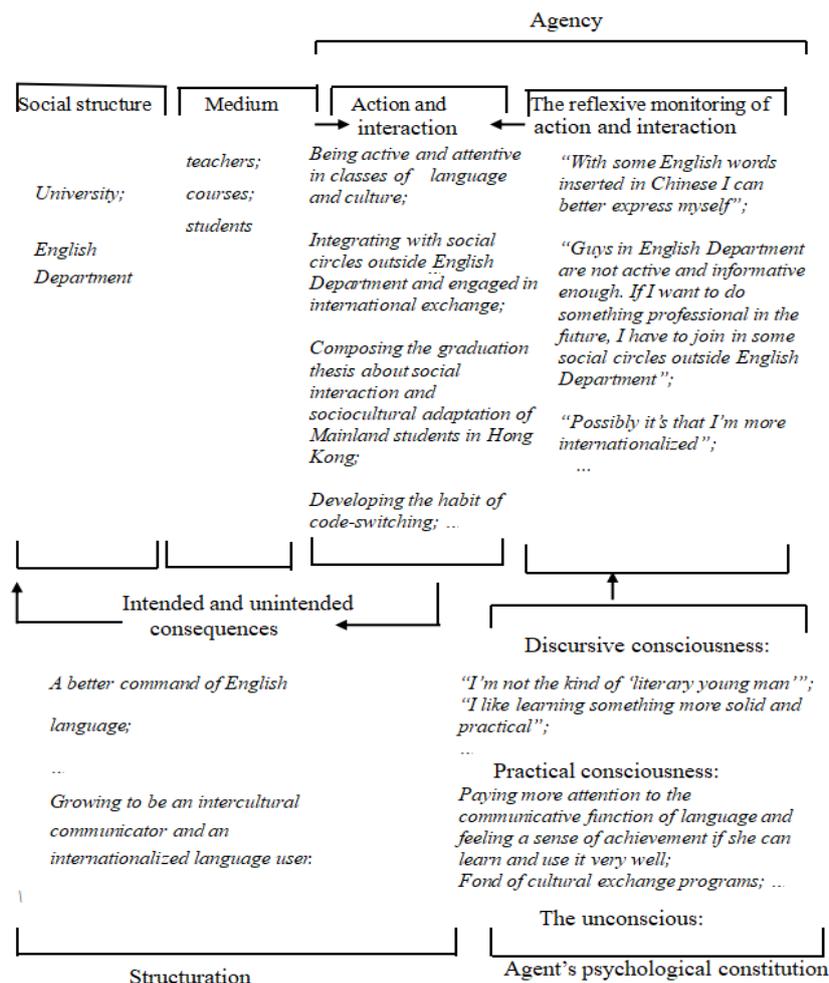


Figure 3: Linda's Agency in Structuration

Linda made multiple investments in learning and using English, during which she constructed multiple identities. In all her investments, there was a line running through the whole process, that is, her interest in communication, especially in intercultural communication. She was a pragmatic EFL learner in courses work, attaching more importance to the communicative function of languages, and an active intercultural communicator in extracurricular activities, fond of intercultural communication. Linda's agency in her action and interaction could be shown in the figure 3.

## 4.2 Helen's Story

### 4.2.1 A "Workaholic" Shutling between Departments

Helen exercised strong agency in drawing on different resources in terms of courses work, constructing a "workaholic" shuttling between departments.

Helen took great interest in English linguistics, and was disappointed to find that the courses in English Department were dominated by English literature. Courses in the field of linguistics were far from enough for her. Therefore, in order to learn more about linguistics, Helen took some courses in the Department of Chinese Language and Literature, such as *Modern Chinese, Putonghua and Dialects* and *Study on Chinese Language*, and found them very useful.

*They taught IPA in great details, including how to transcribe them, the position of the tongue and etc., which was not under great attention in the course of General Linguistics in English Department. Maybe they attached emphasis to different aspects.* (Interview, 3, I)

Besides, out of her interest in history, Helen took a second degree program in the Department of History, and also found the connection between the courses in history and those in English.

*For example, the Victorian society in English history is closely connected with what we've learned in the courses of English literature in our department. ...I think history has something in common with literature and linguistics, which is also helpful to my research on sociolinguistics.* (Interview, 3, II)

With so many courses to take, Helen was always busy, especially during the weeks before final exams. Besides the term papers and exams in English courses, she also had to memorize "a lot of stuff" in history. "I sleep for only about 3 hours when exams are approaching", she said. From the sophomore year to the senior year, Helen altogether took 47 courses in English Department, 6 courses in Chinese Department and 16 courses in Department of History, as well as other public courses such as politics, PE and French. She once joked online that she was a "workaholic" and "masochistic" by choosing so many courses to attend. In one of her journals online, Helen wrote:

*"Taking a second degree, excessively fulfilling...hang in".* (Online journal, 3, II)

As can be seen above, Helen exercised strong agency in drawing on different resources from the learning context by monitoring her learning experience reflexively. Her playful reference to herself as "workaholic" and "masochistic" to some extent showed her struggle and ambivalence in so many investments.

### 4.2.2 A Culture-Conscious EFL learner

Helen was a culture-conscious EFL learner. She showed great interest in sociolinguistics, thinking that "linguistics with the combination of culture and society is very interesting and of realistic significance", which facilitated her investment in extracurricular activities.

For example, during the summer vacation of her junior year, Helen took part in an activity as a volunteer in Fenghuang County, Miao and Tu Autonomous Prefectures, west of Hunan Province, to raise people's awareness of cultural protection. She was responsible for the part of folk architecture, taking students to visit the local buildings. She enjoyed it very much, and got some "spiritual return" from that activity

*What attracted me most was that they could make me happy and arouse my curiosity. ...There was a teammate from Chinese University of Hong Kong, majoring in modern languages, studying things like phonology, syntax, and so on. He had spent a year studying Changsha dialect and you know, he could transcribe what Miao minority says! ...Now many of us keep in touch with each other by emails. We share some common interests and can talk about them together.* (Interview, 3, II)

This activity brought Helen a "bonus", which she had not expected before going there. After coming back from Fenghuang County, she found that some stuff concerning identity and

code-switching in the records they had made in the activity was very interesting, so she used the materials in the presentation of *Discourse Analysis*, which was well received by the teacher and her classmates:

*Her presentation is very impressive with the beautiful pictures she has taken in Fenghuang County and the coherent organization of her presentation. The teacher and her classmates are amazed and touched by her enthusiasm in that activity.* (Class observation, 3, II).

The “bonus” of the activity for Helen was an “unintended consequence”, which was both the outcome of her previous acts and a condition of her further acts. From then on, Helen grew increasingly interested in different cultures and made more investment in the study of them. Sometimes she would read some books about ethnic minority peoples.

#### **4.2.3 An Open-Minded Multiculturalist**

Helen was an open-minded multiculturalist in that she had access to different cultures when engaging in the extracurricular activities and kept an open mind to each of them.

Learning in English Department and also taking courses in Chinese department, she had more access to knowing about and experiencing Western culture and Chinese culture. When it came to different cultures, Helen found that she was more and more open minded. She found that some people who said they admire western cultures actually knew quite a little about them. They did not have a deep core of understanding of Chinese culture and western cultures.

*Chinese culture and western culture at large is a big topic. Take this plate of assorted fresh fruits for example (pointing to the plate in front of us), is it Chinese or western? ...Those who are imitators of foreign cultures think highly of everything in a foreign country. And they praise them verbally but don't know the core meaning of or within something. For example, probably they can use knives and forks, but they don't understand the meaning of them. I feel pathetic for them since they neither understand Chinese culture nor know much about the western culture. They are nobody.* (Interview, 4, I)

As shown in the interview above, Helen was open minded about different cultures. She once talked about the “table manners” in different cultures and said that they were just “variants” to each other. In this sense, different cultures for her were possibly also like different “variants”, and she just looked at them as they were, which might be related to her investment in extracurricular activities concerning different cultures.

In the senior year, Helen decided to go abroad for further education. She had two favorite majors to choose between, sociolinguistics and history. After weighing the two in mind, she finally chose sociolinguistics, and made a very vivid comparison between them.

*To me, sociolinguistics is interesting. The courses in sociolinguistics make me feel that, wow, some guys are doing serious research on what I have come across in my life and what I have thought about before, you know. As to history, it is too difficult for me. It is interesting to learn, but to do research on it is not what I'm capable of. It's like choosing a husband. Not every handsome guy can make a good husband. To me, sociolinguistics is just like a husband who is interesting and meanwhile can help me make a good living.* (Interview, 4, II)

#### **4.2.4 Summary**

Helen made multiple investments in both courses work and extracurricular activities. She exercised strong agency in drawing on different resources in the learning context. A line running through Helen's investments in courses work and extracurricular activities was her identity of a culture-conscious EFL learner. The agency Helen exercised in her action and interaction could be shown in the following figure 4.

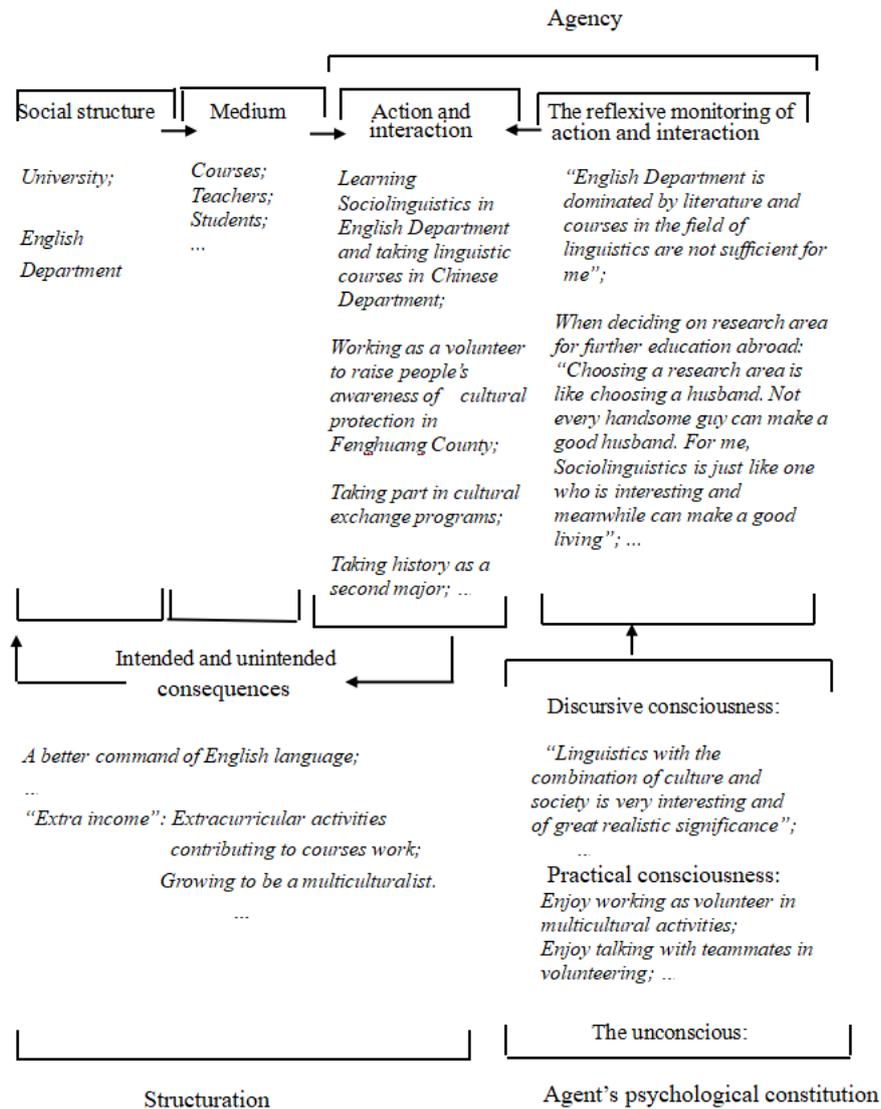


Figure 4: Helen's Agency in Structuration

### 4.3 Aimee's Story

#### 4.3.1 A Quiet Docile Student in the Classroom

Aimee was a quiet student. She was attentive in class but did not like to answer questions or give presentations, because she did not want to "show off" or "lose face" when failing to do well.

*I don't like showing up in public and I tend to get nervous when speaking in front of that many people. In addition, to give a good presentation, you have to be humorous and with extensive knowledge, which was beyond me. Also, I'm afraid of losing face if I could not do a good job.* (Interview, 3, I)

In the class observations during the two years, she was found attentive for most of the time in class, but seldom answered teachers' questions actively.

*Aimee was very attentive, listening carefully to the teacher and taking notes, but she kept looking down at her books instead of answering teacher's questions actively.* (Class Observation, 3, I).

In interviews Aimee mentioned repeatedly those "excellent students" in her class. She revealed that she saw a gap between her and them, and "had to take it and live with it".

*They really have great capability. They are smart and intelligent in academic research, too. They can make very beautiful slides and have them presented just well. I'm quite poor at such*

*things. ...Anyway, the gap has already existed, and I have to take it and live with it. What I can do is work hard and try my best within my reach.* (Interview, 3, II)

In this sense, Aimee's hard work was also a response to her reflexive monitoring of her learning experience. What's more, she could express her reflection in a discursive form, "Anyway, the gap has already existed, and I have to take it and live with it. What I can do is work hard and try my best within my reach." In a sense, Aimee's being attentive and quiet in class was a means of exercising agency to respond to the conditions she had been aware of when reflecting on her learning context, although in a practical consciousness (Giddens, 1984).

#### **4.3.2 A Committed and Persistent Investor in EFL Learning**

Aimee was a committed investor in English learning in that she took part in only a few extracurricular activities and devoted most of her time to the courses work. She was persistent in that she set the goal to pursue a master degree in English major as early as her sophomore year and made persistent efforts to reach it both in and out of class.

*There is little spare time for me. It seems that I am always reading books, writing papers and taking exams. Then not much spare time is left for me.* (Interview, 3, II)

Another reason was related to her previous learning experience.

*My life now is centered on courses work, which is connected with my previous learning experience. From primary school to high school, I kept being told by the teachers and my parents that I should work hard, and then I could go to a good university, and then I could have a good future. Also, the surrounding environment and especially the College Entrance Examination pushed me to center on study.* (Interview, 3, II)

In this sense, Aimee's persistent investment in courses work was a continuity of her previous experience. Her identity of a persistent learner had a feature of continuity in terms of her biography.

Among all the courses provided in English Department, Aimee liked English literature much more.

*Reading everyday makes me feel safe and at ease. ... I feel particularly happy when reading short stories. The poems are very beautiful, too. The teacher explains them in very beautiful language.* (Interview, 4, I)

#### **4.3.3 A Supporter of Chinese Culture**

When talking about her attitudes toward Chinese culture and western cultures, Aimee showed obvious preference to the former. She explained as follows.

*I don't like the western extroverted way although I don't know much about the west. Like the TV series of Friends, my teacher once played it for us in our listening class. I don't like it at all, nothing meaningful, possibly because of the difference in cultures. I don't like the way those actors speak. My classmates find it very funny, but I find nothing funny in it. ... I don't believe in the so called "American dreams". My principle is let it be, trying my best to do everything well within my reach, no fierce competing against others. I like Chinese culture more.* (Interview, 4, I)

Aimee's attitude towards American culture indicated her identity of a person withdrawn from competitions, which to some degree also conformed to her behaviour in class.

On the other hand, Aimee emphasized that when she was reading English novels, it was a different story. English language for her was "just a kind of symbols", and she did not see it as a foreign language.

*At the very start, English was just a subject for me. If I can do well, I will have a sense of achievement. Now, English is more than an instrument for communication. I mean, literature works share something in common. I remember one classmate once said that he was communicating with Shakespeare when reading his works, not a communication with a FOREIGN writer but one between two persons. I'm also communicating with my writer. I don't feel any obstacles because it is written in English. I think the thoughts of human beings are common to each nation.* (Interview, 4, I)

#### **4.3.4 Summary**

Unlike Linda and Helen, who made multiple investments both in courses work and in extracurricular activities, Aimee made unitary investments, mostly centered upon the courses work in English major. However, it did not mean that Aimee exercised little agency in the whole process. She

exercised strong agency in reflecting on her conditions. When she found the “gap” between her and those students “from larger cities”, she decided to live with it and try her best to work hard within her reach. She set a goal to pursue a master degree in English Department and eventually made it with her persistent efforts. Aimee’s agency in her action and interaction could be shown in the following figure 5.

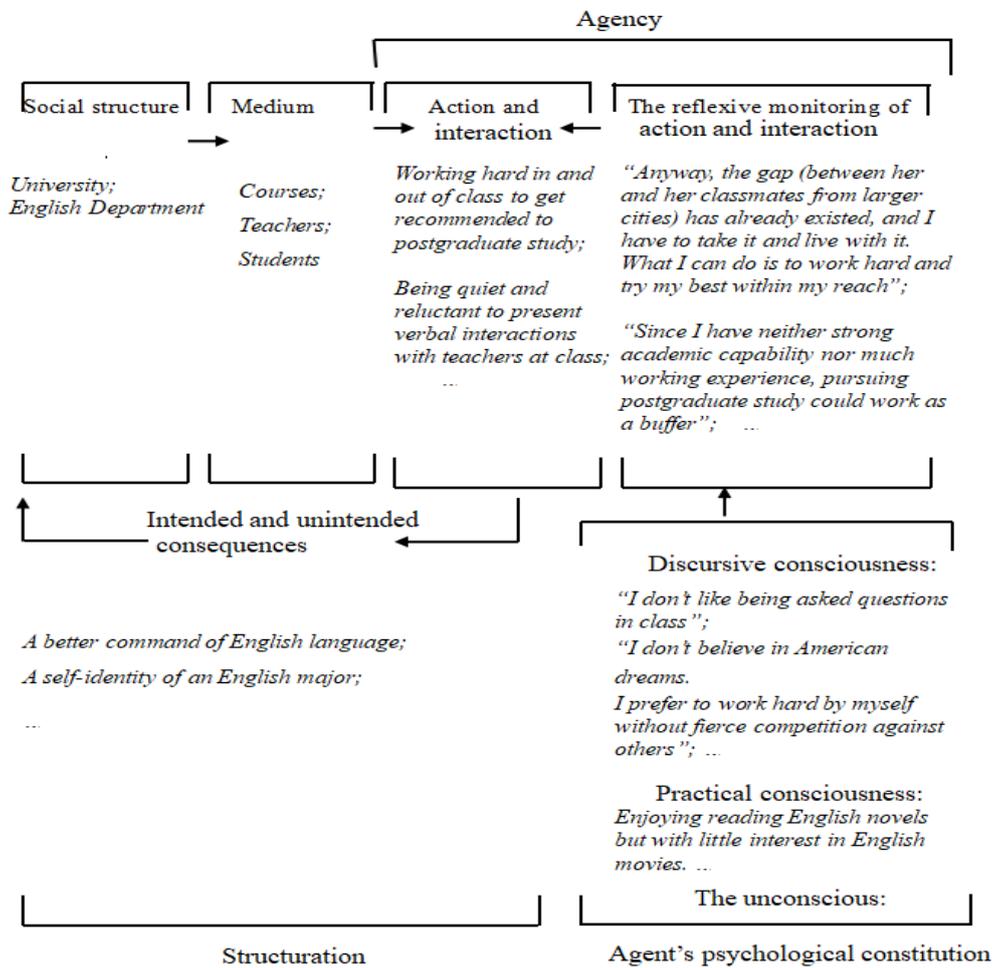


Figure 5: Aimee’s Agency in Structuration

## 5. Conclusion

This 2-year longitudinal study found that students exercised strong agency in drawing on different resources selectively, and constructed multiple identities.

Linda invested more in the communicative function of language and refrained from literature courses with much workload, constructing an identity of a pragmatic EFL learner, and meanwhile drew strengths from communities of practice outside English Department, constructing an identity of an active intercultural communicator; Helen invested more in the courses concerning culture and the cultural exchange programs, constructing an identity of a culture-conscious EFL learner; Aimee was committed to courses work, constructing an identity of a persistent EFL learner.

Besides, unintended consequences were produced by learners’ acts, which in turn served as conditions of their further acts. For example, Linda grew to be an active intercultural communicator, which spurred her further efforts; Helen got a “bonus” from her investment in extracurricular activities and applied it to her courses work.

However, there were individual differences between them. They constructed different core identities although positioned in the same learning context. Linda was a pragmatic EFL learner, attaching more importance to the communicative function of languages; Helen was a culture-conscious EFL learner, interested in linguistics combined with culture and society; Aimee was a persistent EFL learner devoted

to EFL learning moving towards a set goal. Their attitudes toward western cultures were not the same, either. Linda and Helen were more open-minded to cultural differences. Aimee showed an obvious preference for Chinese culture.

In addition, the present study could provide some pedagogical implications to EFL teaching. Teachers should pay more attention to students' identity development when learning and using English. Only in this way can they make effective interaction with students in the teaching process. Just as Brown argues, as long as one continues to teach, he will never run out of new questions, new possibilities, new ways of looking at his students and new ways of looking at himself (Brown, 2001: 3). Teaching nowadays is much more than giving knowledge. Knowing the identity development students are experiencing when learning and using a foreign language will help teachers to be more effective in facilitating students' learning agency.

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