A Troubling Tale of Two English Learners on the Chinese Mainland

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This paper describes the English-learning experiences of two students from a low-ranking college on the Chinese mainland. Using a biographical method, the paper explores a group of English learners’ English-learning experiences prior to and after their arrival at the college. By focusing on two learners, the paper illustrates the profound impact that a competitive educational context can have on individual students’ language learning approaches, identity, and relationships with teachers and peers in the learning process. It reveals that these learners adopted an exam-oriented learning approach to pursue being the winners in the sociocultural context of academic competition. In the process, teachers played an important role in the learners’ adoption of learning strategies, internalization of learning discourses, and co-construction of identities. Meanwhile, the tense peer relationships caused by the academic competition seem to have prevented them from choosing alternative learning approaches and strategies.

Keywords: The Chinese Mainland, Foreign Language Learning, Learning Experiences, Learning Approach, Academic Competition.

Introduction

This paper will present the language learning experiences of two English major students from a low-ranking tertiary vocational college in a coastal province of the Chinese mainland to illustrate how social and contextual processes like academic competition have a far-reaching impact on individual students’ language learning approaches, identities, and relationships with teachers and peers in the learning process. Past research efforts seem to have concentrated on English language learners from high-profile cities or universities (e.g. Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Gao, Li, & Li, 2002; Gan, Humphreys, & Hamp-Lyons, 2004; Gu, 2003). Since there are huge inter- and intra-regional differences in the teaching and learning of English experienced every day by students on the Chinese mainland (Gieve & Clark, 2005; Hu, G. 2003), it is also important for researchers to focus on students at less privileged settings.

The focus of the paper will be on the students’ English language learning in the context of their general educational experiences, taken from a larger biographical inquiry. Ling and Feng (pseudonyms) were two third-year students doing a three-year diploma program in Business English. They represented successful and underachieving learners in the inquiry. Ling was the only child from a relatively well-off family in a small town while Feng was the elder daughter from a rural family. Both of them went to secondary vocational school thinking that secondary vocational education would be the end of their educational path. However, they graduated with new hopes that they would become tertiary students. Ling went to one of the best secondary vocational schools in the province and Feng attended a non-key vocational school. At college, Ling was widely perceived by her peers and teachers as a successful and independent learner with an outstanding academic record whereas Feng was, in contrast, an under-achiever.

This paper uses Layder’s (1993) research resource map as the analytic framework. The framework requires researchers to explore a focus on sociocultural discourses and social conditions, institutional settings, situated activity, and individual actors’ self. It begins with a survey of the often contradictory research claims regarding Chinese students and goes on problematizing the current climate of intense
educational competition that has been exacerbated by shifting Chinese educational policies. This helps set up a wider social and cultural context for readers to interpret the learners’ tale. Then it depicts the struggles of Ling and Feng as English learners, focusing on the other three elements in the research resource map (Layder, 1993). Through the author’s interpretative reading of the accounts of both students’ experiences, the paper concludes with implications for teachers and policy-makers. In the paper, learners’ language learning approaches are defined as learners’ predispositions towards the use of certain learning strategies (Benson & Lor, 1999). Although there are a wide range of theories about identity, the paper adopts a co-constructionist approach to defining identity, in which identity is crucially related to contexts and has to be constantly negotiated between the individual and the society (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Norton, 2000).

**The Paradox of Chinese Students**

Studies of Chinese students often produce contradictory findings on their approaches to learning while Chinese cultural traditions are often used by researchers to justify the conflicting images of Chinese students projected in their studies (Palfreyman, 2003). For instance, some (e.g. Ballard & Clanchy, 1997) find Chinese students passive, reticent, or unwilling to take much responsibility for their own learning because they are assumed to have a deep-rooted respect for authority and cultural dependence on teachers (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Hu, G. 2002; Wen & Clement, 2003). Others (Cheng, X. 2000; Gu, 2003; Littlewood, 1999, 2001; Stephens, 1997) challenge this stereotypical representation of Chinese students and argue that they are encouraged to ask questions and challenge authoritative figures like their teachers.

In the same way, Chinese culture is portrayed as a collectivist culture and Chinese students as highly valuing group harmony in learning (Carson & Nelson, 1996; Jones, 2005; Liu, 2002). In contrast, other studies suggest that Chinese students are highly competitive (Dooley, 2001; Phelps, 2005; Schoenhals, 1993) and that their long held cultural beliefs have been shifting due to recent economic and social developments (e.g. Garrot, 1995; Kang, 2003). These contradictory research claims suggest that Chinese students or Chinese culture are not the homogeneous entity that they have been made out to be; there may in fact be many different sub-groups of individual students embracing different values (Gieve & Clark, 2005; Kubota, 1999; Kumaradivelu, 2003). Research papers further suggest that there are other social and contextual processes influencing Chinese students’ behavior in the learning process (Cheng, X. 2000; Dooley, 2001). For instance, the Chinese mainland, unlike other Chinese culture entities like Hong Kong or Taiwan, has been a totalitarian society dominated by a mixture of traditional cultural values and socialist ideologies for over half a century, and increasingly influenced by entrepreneurial ideals in recent decades (Fu & Tsui, 2003). The consequence of all this is that, while recognizing the profound influences of cultural traditions, researchers are advised to take a step back from the position of national/ethnic culture and encouraged to explore processes and interactions in small contexts (e.g. Holliday, 1996; Kumaradivelu, 2003; Littlewood, 1999). Such research produces knowledge about ‘temporal, interactional, and in-place’ aspects of students’ learning contexts (Phillion & Connelly, 2004: 460). Along similar lines, Benson and Voller (1997: 12) recommend more rigorous research into ‘the content of learning and the relationship between students, teachers, and institutions’; it is this that we shall explore in this paper to deepen our understanding of students’ language learning realities on the Chinese mainland.
Educational Competition and Educational Equity on the Chinese Mainland

One of the most observable features of the educational context on the Chinese mainland is that it is fiercely competitive because China has a huge population and limited educational resources (Dooley, 2001; Phelps, 2005; Yang, F. 2002; Wang, Du, Liu, Liu, & Wang, 2002). Traditionally, Chinese people have always placed a high value on education (Cheng, K. 1996; Phelps, 2005; Ross, 1993; Schoenhals, 1993; Turner & Acker, 2002; Yang, F. 2002). For centuries, Chinese intellectuals sought social promotion by taking extremely competitive imperial exams. In the case of the Chinese mainland, for several decades after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the government imposed strict limits on Chinese citizens’ changing places of residence through a compulsory household registration system, making education one of the few ways for people to move legitimately from rural areas to urban areas and from small towns to big cities (Rosen, 1984; Wu & Treiman, 2003). As a result, most Chinese see education as a means of achieving social and economic mobility (Cheng, K.1996; Zhao & Campbell, 1995). In the tale, Ling and Feng both saw their education and English language learning as closely related to their employment and social advancement. Furthermore, competition in the Chinese mainland’s educational context is not conducted on an equal footing. The government’s resource allocation policies have often increased this inequality and created deep-rooted divides between rural and urban areas as well as key and non-key institutions (Tsang & Ding, 2005; Wu & Treiman, 2003).

In the first place, the discriminatory nature of these policies have caused unequal access to educational resources and opportunities for students in rural and urban areas (Park, Li, & Wang, 2003; Tsang & Ding, 2005; Wu & Treiman, 2003). The government’s new educational initiatives have attempted to address the equity issue at the school level for many students in respect of the transition between primary and junior secondary education (Park et al. 2003). Nevertheless, equal access to further education remains problematic for students in rural schools (Hu, J. 2004; Shen & Li, 2004). As a result, academic life in rural schools, as revealed in Feng’s accounts of her experience, can be either extremely stressful for those who desire further studies or demoralizing for those who feel little benefit can be reaped from their learning endeavors. In fact, psychiatry studies indicate that university students from rural families display a higher level of anxiety, aggression-hostility, and depression than those from urban families (Hesketh, Ding, & Jenkins, 2002; Wang et al. 2002).

Secondly, the situation is exacerbated by recent government efforts to develop elite tertiary institutions by concentrating financial and educational resources on a list of selected institutions, hoping to develop so-called world-class universities (Zhao & Guo, 2002). This intervention has reinforced the existing educational hierarchy of non-key and key institutions at all educational levels. Competition for places at key institutions, which starts at the earliest stage of Chinese education, has greatly intensified. Key schools attract highly qualified teaching staff and have a very high admission standard to recruit high-caliber entrants (Ross, 1993; Schoenhals, 1993; Tsang, 2003). Students in these key schools have more opportunities to receive further education and are more likely to enter elite tertiary institutions than those at non-key schools (Dooley, 2001; Phelps, 2005; Ross, 1993; Schoenhals, 1993). As will be seen, the stories of Ling and Feng partly reflect disparities in the educational resources available for individual students in key and non-key schools.

Thirdly, another significant factor, the marketisation of tertiary institutions, has led to the principle of user-pays and the abolition of the traditional job-assignment policy for tertiary graduates from the mid-1990s onwards (Hu, J. 2004; Shen & Li,
These policies have resulted in a dramatic rise in the stakes involved in tertiary education. Consequently, students are ever more apprehensive about employment prospects as the job market becomes increasingly competitive, particularly for those studying at low ranking and non-elite institutions (Hu, J. 2004). Various measures, including increasing the number of financial rewards like merit-based scholarships, have been introduced to enhance students’ academic performance through competition (Yang, F. 2002). These measures also tend to create relationship divisions between students, as is revealed in Ling’s narrative. For these reasons, Chinese tertiary students pay heavy emotional costs (Liu et al. 1999).

Testimony to this is provided by a cross-national survey indicating that Chinese university students suffer from a higher level of stress compared with their counterparts in Japan and Korea (Kim et al. 1997). For students like Ling and Feng, in China’s newly established tertiary vocational colleges, their lives turned out to be exceptionally stressful as they had the additional worry of finding employment. The figure for tertiary graduates’ employment makes grim reading (Hu, J. 2004; Postiglione, 2005). In 2003, only 55 percent of graduates from specialist and vocational colleges found jobs, in contrast with 83% of those who graduated with a university degree (Postiglione, 2005, p.4).

The Study

The study, addressing the research question ‘What is it like to learn English for students in a Chinese vocational institution?’, took place in a self-funded tertiary institution founded in 1999 amidst the massive Chinese tertiary education expansion. Vocational education, which prepares students for technical jobs, is considered as an inferior form of education because technical jobs have a low status in the eyes of the public (Schulte, 2003). The low status of vocational schools and colleges is further diminished by the fact that they are assigned by the government to admit students only after four other types of tertiary institutions with a higher status have finished their admissions following each National College Entrance Test. It is no coincidence that they normally take academically weak school graduates, of which a large proportion are from rural and low-income families (Hu, J. 2004; Shen & Li, 2004). In 2004, when Ling and Feng were graduating from college, over two million school graduates became tertiary vocational students, i.e. half of the total newly enrolled tertiary students (Ministry of Education, 2005).

The author used biographical interviews to collect the students’ English language learning histories. The biographical method, where language learners’ retrospective accounts of their experiences are collected and analyzed, has been gaining currency in language learning research. Many researchers (e.g. Benson, Chi, & Lim, 2003; Block, 1998; Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Lin et al. 2002; Palfreyman, 2003; Benson, 2005) have found this method helpful in capturing learners’ voices and enhancing our understanding of what they really experience.

There were two rounds of interviews: the first-round interviews, lasting about 45 minutes, were semi-structured (see appendix for a brief interview schedule) and engaged the students in sharing their English learning past with the researcher. The second-round interviews lasted about 20-25 minutes and were about specific issues that the researcher felt interested in after initial readings of the transcript of the first interviews. All interviews were in Chinese and recorded on tape for later verbatim transcription and analysis. Quotes used by the paper have been translated by the author and verified by a second translator.

When processing the data, the author first synthesized students’ experiential statements into biographical narratives, as advised by Colley and Diment (2001). The
narratives centered on their English language learning experiences according to different educational settings, including their experiences in junior middle schools, vocational schools, and the college. During the interpretative reading of the two students’ biographical accounts, the author relied very much on Layder’s (1993) research resource map and examined students’ statements concerning the students themselves and the situated activity (English learning) at institutional settings. The statements related to ‘institutional settings’ were further divided into those about peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher relationships, as recommended by Benson and Voller (1997) and Oxford (2001). The actual process of data analysis was interactive with further categories of analysis emerging from the data. All data and its categories were then checked for accuracy by other researchers.

**Ling and Feng’s Learning Biographies**

Ling and Feng’s learning biographies will first be presented, followed by analysis and interpretation.

**Ling**

*At the Beginning*

Before she started learning English at middle (secondary) school, Ling received private English tuition in her last year at primary school. Although she did not particularly like English at the beginning, she found that she had advantages over other students in learning English:

> I was able to answer questions asked by the English teacher at middle school because I had learnt it all before. […] From then on, she paid a lot of attention to me and always praised my performance. By and by, as I learnt more, I felt that I could do well in English (Sept. 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2003).

Ling soon began to feel that the teacher’s praise and encouragement were essential for her to maintain her desire to learn more English:

> The more praise I got from my teachers, the more interested I became in learning English. Without their attention and praise, I would not have done well in English (Sept. 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2003).

However, she also found it problematic to rely too much on teachers. In her final year at middle school, her new English teacher required students to read aloud the words in a vocabulary list from A to Z every morning but he often forgot which section of the list his students had finished reading in the previous reading sessions. Ling and her classmates were alarmed by the fact that they kept doing the same thing every day while the school-leaving exam was just around the corner. So they decided to rebel against the teacher’s instructions and read the vocabulary list in their own way. This particular incident was the beginning of her effort to manage her own English learning, as she recalled:

> I started learning English in my own way gradually although I was not totally aware of it. […] I just knew that the teacher was boring and I liked to read what I was interested in. In the end, I borrowed grammar exercise books myself and worked on mock tests (Sept. 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2003).
At Secondary Technical School

At secondary technical school, she met a teacher whom she admired greatly. In the first semester, the teacher told her that she could learn other things easily if she could pronounce the letters of the alphabet accurately. So she did not do anything else apart from imitate closely the teachers’ pronunciation of the twenty-six letters. Ling apparently appreciated what the teacher had taught her a great deal:

The way she taught us English pronunciation will benefit me for the whole of my life. Upon my entrance to the school, she taught us how to study on our own. I still feel highly indebted to her and am grateful for having a teacher like her (Sept. 22nd, 2003).

She did seem to have learned a lot from the teacher, particularly about how to learn English. She adopted a similar approach to improve her grammar:

After a semester spent learning correct pronunciation, I felt that I had forgotten all my grammar and that I knew nothing any more about grammar. I then discovered a book called ‘The Ultimate Grammar for Beginners’ and studied it from the first page to the last page. I felt that I improved my grammatical knowledge by doing so. Later, I even went to buy the same grammar book for intermediate students (Sept. 22nd, 2003).

She persisted in studying English in this apparently stressful way because she was very much appreciated by the teacher and partly out of her sense of responsibility for learning as a student leader:

I was then the liaison student between the teacher and the whole class. If the teacher asked a question and nobody was able to answer it, including me, I would certainly be reprimanded by her. I had to learn more because my teacher and classmates expected me to do so. […] It was stressful. I do not want to say that I liked this kind of life. But there was no better choice, I guess (Sept. 22nd, 2003).

At College

One year after she entered the vocational school, Ling learned that she had an opportunity to go on to study at a tertiary vocational college. She chose to undertake tertiary studies in Business English because her mother insisted that China’s inevitable entry into the World Trade Organization would bring more English-related jobs. After entering the college, she found that she had more time for self-study and that teachers were less involved in students’ language learning. The relationship between her and her fellow students was full of tensions and deteriorated on some occasions, such as when she won a scholarship competition or a student leaders’ election. She talked about the consequences that the scholarships had on her classmates:

Competition caused fissures in our relationship. […] If someone got the first scholarship and others got none, the way that they looked at you would be different. I did not know and did not try to know what they thought about me (Sept. 22nd, 2003).

As a result, she sometimes felt isolated and depressed. In order to solve these problems, she actively sought teachers’ advice and suggestions and consulted
psychiatrists in the college, although she was considered to be weird for doing so by her peers. However, after passing the College English Test (CET) Band 6, one of the key national English tests, she lost a prime motivating learning target and wondered what to do next.

I had passed the CET-6 and now I felt like a ship without sailing directions. I felt lost in learning (Sept. 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2003).

She was also apparently worried about how she could prove that she had better English as an English major graduate:

I have been always asking myself: “How much English have I learnt? Is it enough for me to have CET-4 and -6 scores?” For graduates who specialize in accounting, they have at least their major in accountancy. They also have CET-4 results. But what have we, English major graduates, specialized in, and how well have we done so? I cannot answer this question (Sept. 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2003).

She decided to take another test to improve her oral competency but she could not find anyone who shared similar learning objectives to work with her to mutually enhance their communicative competence in English:

It is a problem in the learning environment. Some students are motivated to learn English but not all of us are. Maybe some students feel lonely in learning, too. Because we do not have much communication, it is difficult for us to collaborate in our language learning (Sept. 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2003).

Without a collaborative learning partner, she had to use a lot of memorization strategies, which apparently suited learners who learnt languages in isolation:

I take the Integrated English course. I memorize words and read textbooks. […] I also listened to tapes for Business English Certificate (BEC) exams. […] Sometimes I watched movies and read a few books related to English language or books about Western culture, including their food and fashion (Ling, Oct. 8\textsuperscript{th}, 2003).

Gradually, she had developed a learning approach that assumes language learning as a process of accumulating blocks of vocabulary and phrases. When asked on what occasions she felt that she had improved her English, her initial responses were directly related to vocabulary and phrases:

As an obvious example, I tried to memorize a word first and the word would appear subsequently in a book or my teachers’ lectures. I had some knowledge about that word but its re-appearance deepened my understanding of it. I felt that I had learnt something. It is the same with a phrase (Oct. 8\textsuperscript{th}, 2003).

Feng

At the Beginning

Feng described her start in learning English at a countryside middle school in the following words:

Very few students in my class were interested in learning English because my school was in the countryside. At that time, I cannot say
that I liked English, I just felt so interested in learning English. I did not work very hard at all. […] At that time I always got decent score (Sept. 27th, 2003).

Then an English teacher from her middle school became interested in her and offered her special support. He also gave her extra exercises and good test-preparation books to work on. Somehow Feng disappointed the teacher by choosing not to respond to his ‘favor’ with extra learning efforts.

But I did not fully understand why I had to do these exercises. I was not fully motivated to learn English. I guess I was too young to understand why. I thought my English was OK, if not excellent. […] Had I persisted in doing more exercises, my English would not have been that terrible (Sept. 27th, 2003).

As a result, she found that she slowly fell behind the others in her later years at middle school. Furthermore, her new teacher had a boring classroom teaching style and kept giving endless exercises to his students to prepare them for the school-leaving exam:

He taught English not according to your interest or needs. He tried to cram the stuff into your brain. We were asked to keep doing exercises. All exercises were about grammar […] He did not encourage us to have language–feel. Just keep doing exercises. The more, the better (Sept. 27th, 2003).

At Secondary Technical School

After entering secondary technical school, Feng badly wanted to have a rest after going through a year of intense exam preparation. Her new school was under-resourced and did not have enough full-time English teachers. Her English teachers often taught at a number of different schools in rotation and could not stay after class to answer questions:

They (teachers) might routinely ask whether we had any questions. Sometimes they did not even bother to ask. We had few opportunities to talk to them. […] I was then only seventeen or eighteen and did not have strong self-control. […] I felt that I did not have to work hard. […] My teachers did not make us work hard either (Sept. 27th, 2003).

She confessed that she did not do much in learning English but she regretted it when she was about to graduate from the technical school:

After two years, […] my English was so bad that I could not possibly find any work. So I had to do further education (Sept. 27th, 2003).

In her last year at vocational school, she was informed that she could take exams for further education if she wanted. She decided to take the National College Entrance Test like many others in the same school. The school organized a special class and assigned a teacher to be responsible for them. The teacher tried her best to boost their morale for test-preparation:

[…] to help us go to university, she kept urging us to work harder. She was afraid that we were not motivated enough so she organized class meetings every day. […] Because she had a tight control over our learning, I started to realize that I had to work hard, too. […] She told us that only if we had good exam scores could we go to a good university. Only if we had good scores!! (Sept. 27th, 2003).
At college, she had more time to study by herself but still remained a low-profile learner. She enjoyed learning activities, such as classroom drama performance, which helped to give students the courage to speak English in public. However, she seldom met with success and became more unwilling to lose her face before others. She also felt that she would be singled out by her classmates if she tried to speak English:

After all, we all have some sense of pride in ourselves. [...] I felt so nervous that I would start to stutter. Later on, I lost my confidence in speaking in English. [...] I can remain silent in class. It is my right to do so (Sept. 27th, 2003).

The peer relationship had been often quite stressful with little communication between her and her classmates at college. The teamwork projects promoted by some teachers might encourage them to exchange ideas among team members but it was often difficult for her and her classmates to accomplish anything because different team members had different ideas in dealing with tasks or had different interests at stake. Consequently, Feng preferred tasks with clearly specified instructions from teachers:

We are all concerned with our own interest. If it does not relate to our own interest, we would not be motivated to do anything. [...] It is better for teachers to assign roles to us clearly in the project or give us individual work (Sept. 27th, 2003).

Meanwhile, Feng had a strong desire for success and for a real sense of achievement in learning. Since she reported no real success at all, she had developed a very extreme idea of what learning achievement consisted in:

When we (and my classmates) are talking about something and I find that I know something that they do not know, I feel that I have learnt something (Oct. 8th, 2003).

She also felt it absolutely necessary to prove that she was better in English than non-major graduates. That is why she regarded it as ‘a political task’ for her to pass the CET-6 test after passing the CET-4 test. To pass the CET exam, she committed herself to preparing for it. She spent a lot of time on learning English as she used to do when she was preparing for other exams in the past:

I do what I usually do. I take classes and undertake self-study and nothing special. I am also preparing for the College English Test (CET) Band 6 exam. I am working very hard on memorizing words. Then I do some simulation exercises. [...] I also listened to the radio, or cassettes. [...] And sometimes I went to the library to read English-related materials (Feng, Oct. 8th, 2003).

In spite of her failures in learning, she firmly believed that she had the ability to learn English and use the learning resources available at learning sites to improve her learning. Although she believed that she, not anyone else, was responsible for her own failures, she still complained forcibly that her teachers had given her little attention and support in the past. She thought that she had been a ‘phantom learner’ to them too often:

It was always like this. [...] You know, schools and teachers always pay much attention to good students. They always neglect some students, particularly those in the middle, like me. If you are still able
to catch up with the others in study and do not pose serious problems, you will be neglected (Oct. 8th, 2003).

She expected a teacher to play an important role in students’ language learning. In addition to promoting independent learning skills among students, she maintained that:

A teacher should encourage us to get used, for example, to an open teaching style. They should help us to get used to it gradually. A teacher should try to create strong desires for learning among students (Oct. 8th, 2003).

However, she became quite conservative in choosing learning strategies and approaches. Believing that others’ learning methods may not suit her, she refused to consider possibilities of collaborating with her peers in learning and chose to prepare for the English test alone.

**Interpreting the Students’ Biographical Narratives**

To some extent, Ling and Feng epitomize the struggles of many Chinese English students in learning English at similar tertiary institutions on the Chinese mainland. Both students’ accounts reflect the popular conceptualization of education as a key to social and economic mobility (Cheng, K. 1996; Yang, F. 2002). They see English proficiency or English exam scores as a gatekeeper controlling access to material and social capital and are deeply concerned about employment resulting from the marketisation of tertiary institutions and the effect on employment prospects (Pennycook, 1994; Zhao & Campbell, 1995; Zhao & Guo, 2002). Their biographical narratives also reveal the profound impact that academic competition has left on their language learning experiences, particularly in terms of their relationships with teachers and other students and their perceptions of themselves as graduating English major students. The data indicate that both learners have adopted an exam-oriented language learning approach and strategies to pursue a ‘winner’ identity in the academic competition.

**Exam-oriented Learning**

Both learners seem to have adopted a predominantly exam-oriented learning approach to maximize their exam performance due to the competitive nature of the educational process. The educational system initially imposed exams on them early in their educational experience as a means of ensuring their upward movement in the educational and social hierarchies (e.g. Phelps, 2005; Ross, 1993). Although Ling and Feng seem to have had different attitudes towards exams at the beginning of their English learning careers, after their arrival in the college, both of them seem to have internalized the sociocultural discourse about learning and realized that academic achievement, especially English language proficiency, in terms of standard proficiency exam certificates, would decide whether they could be what they wanted to be (Yang, F. 2002; Zhao & Campbell, 1995). As a result, they appear to have been more than willing to use exams as authoritative tools to define their achieved language proficiency and objective goals to upgrade their linguistic knowledge (Shohamy, 2000). Many years of academic competition and high-stake exams inevitably had shaping effects upon Ling and Feng’s conceptions of language learning (Benson & Lor, 1999; Richardson, 2005): Ling looked on language learning as a process of accumulating discrete linguistic knowledge, such as vocabulary and phrases, and Feng
wanted the satisfaction of proving that she was smarter than her classmates, something she was rarely able to achieve. Such conceptions formed the bases of their learning approaches, which are their predispositions towards using certain strategies in learning English (Benson & Lor, 1999).

**Teacher-dependence**

Both learners portrayed themselves as teacher-dependent in their narratives although they also believed that language learning had to be sustained and enhanced by individual students’ self-will at all costs (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). The data show that teachers were important to their English language learning in three aspects. First, English teachers could introduce successful ways of learning English to them and foster their learning skills. Ling and Feng both had teachers who had interest in helping them become better English language learners although Ling was probably much luckier than Feng. Because of such expectations, teachers were also subject to learners’ criticisms if they failed to fulfill their expected roles (Schoenhals, 1993). In particular, Feng, as an under-achieving learner, seems to have had more complaints about teachers than Ling. Second, teachers also gave motivating learning discourses and important learning beliefs to them. For instance, Ling was taught to accumulate linguistic knowledge by working on her pronunciation of twenty-six letters one by one after she followed her teacher at technical school. Feng had a teacher who instilled a powerful learning discourse into her mind, i.e. better exam grades = better colleges = better future. Third, teachers’ supportive attention to these learners had always been a crucial resource for them to construct themselves as good students. Both students appreciated that teachers’ praise and academic assistance were incentives for them to overcome difficulties, boredom, and diffidence in learning English. It was essential for Ling to develop her identity as a good student to experience being recognized as such by teachers at school. Teachers’ favorable recognition motivated Ling to pursue better standard exam grades, which supported her claims as a competent English learner, the winner of the academic competition. As for Feng, her failures in winning teachers’ favorable recognition meant that she was not a member of the elite students and a winner of the academic competition.

**Peer Relationship**

Another issue emerging from their learning experiences is the stressful peer relationships and feelings of alienation among students, which often undermined their effort to organize effective language learning collaboration and put constraints on their adoption of alternative learning approaches and strategies. This does not mean to contradict the shared view that Chinese culture is a collectivist culture and ‘harmony’ is highly valued by Chinese students (Carson & Nelson, 1996; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jones, 2005; Liu, 2002). Instead, it suggests that, in some settings (e.g. Ross, 1993; Turner & Acker, 2002), ‘harmony’ may not be the best word to describe social processes among Chinese students because social and political realities contradict cultural ideals. Educational competition tends to have disruptive effects upon Chinese students’ relationships and makes these relationships stressful; it thus inhibits students’ learning collaboration and cooperation as revealed in Ling and Feng’s accounts (Turner & Acker, 2002; Wang et al. 2002). This competition may be worse in institutions like a tertiary vocational or low-ranking college in China where opportunities and awards, including further educational and employment opportunities, are scarcer, while students’ financial stakes are high. In addition, both Ling and Feng appear to have suffered from frustration and anxieties (Kim et al.
While Ling managed to deal with her problems by soliciting teachers’ help, many other students, like Feng, who simply bottle up their problems, may even be regarded by others as ‘dependent’ learners who are unable to manage their own learning. They became even more dependent on teachers and institutions to solve their problems most likely because of their feelings of isolation and helplessness.

**Students’ Identity**

The data display that both Ling and Feng wanted to be the winners of the academic competition, which would decide their relationships with others in the wider society (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Norton, 2000). Ling was always ahead of her peers in academic competition and received teachers’ praise and support, which helped reinforce her perception of being a successful student and at the same time isolated her from her peers. Feng was often an average performer in academic competition and rarely attracted her teachers’ and peers’ attention, which helped instill in her a strong desire for being successful and made her frustrated at not being able to win. The perpetual pursuit of winning has obviously made academic life stressful and depressing. It has made these learners feel threatened and vulnerable (e.g. Phelps, 2005). Therefore, it is not surprising to see that both students seem to have undergone a crisis in their identity, facing mounting employment pressure as graduates from a tertiary vocational institution. They both feared that their academic identity, a student majoring in English, was compromised by major and non-major graduates from other institutions of higher ranking, if compared according to their achieved academic levels and institutional reputation (Hu, J. 2004; Shen & Li, 2004: 75; Postiglione, 2005). Many university or college graduates from other academic fields had an advantage over English major graduates due to their professional expertise in their specialized fields in addition to well-documented English language competency in terms of standard test scores. Consequently, Ling and Feng felt compelled to take more and more exams to prove that they were better English language achievers. As a result, they were unwilling to risk trying alternative learning strategies and approaches and were more predisposed to the use of learning strategies that were proven effective in taking exams.

**Conclusion**

The tale is a troubling account of bitter success and helpless frustration against the background of rapid stratification of educational and social opportunities. It recounts how these students struggled along an educational path not of their own choosing for social promotion and economic advancement. It also suggests that the language learning approach they adopted has been meaningful and relevant to their pursuit of the winner identity in a sociocultural context where education is positioned to systematically produce ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ through assessment and evaluation. Therefore, it reminds teachers of the socio-political consequences of their pedagogy and possible futilities of many pedagogic efforts that are in dissonance with this big picture. Furthermore, it challenges teachers to critically reflect on the question of whether to continue pushing students in this academic race, or take on a more supportive role to help students resist the more negative aspects of academic competition, alleviate their anxiety, and create a more emotionally secure learning atmosphere.

The tale of two learners is also a microcosm reflecting what has been happening in the macro social and educational context. It reflects shifting socio-political realities,
which have left indelible marks on educational practice. Although the inquiry is limited in its generalizability, it raises serious questions that need to be addressed at the level of policy-making. In particular, why do policy-makers tend to concentrate educational and financial resources on certain institutions and commit all institutions to brutal competition for scarce rewards? These questions demand serious reflection and reconsideration from the policy-makers who have imposed user-pays, competition for better learning, and commercialization upon students and institutions regardless of educational resources and opportunities (Yang, F. 2002; Zhao & Guo, 2002).

References


**Appendix: Interview Schedule**

1. When did you start learning English?
2. How did you like English at that time?
3. How did you learn English at junior (senior) middle school?
4. How about life at junior (senior) middle school?
5. What was an English lesson at junior (senior) middle school like?
6. Could you share with me your memories of your English teachers?
7. Any other memories of significant people or events related to your English-learning at junior (senior) school?
8. How are you learning English at college?
9. What was an English lesson at the college like?
10. Any interesting events or people at college you wish to talk about?