



# Exploring the Interrelationship between Career Identity and English Learning for Chinese University Graduates: Narrative Cases

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## Author's contribution

*The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore how Chinese University graduates' career identity is interrelated with their English language learning through semi-structured narrative interview of 2 Chinese university graduates. Based on the interview, the analysis focuses on Chinese students' self-assessment concerning the interplay of their career identity and English learning, which is influenced by their family background, career dream and major choice, English learning approaches, work/internship with English. For Chinese university graduates, career identity and English learning experience correlate with each other in constructing the career path in the future.

**Keywords:** Chinese university graduates; interrelationship; career identity; English learning.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Research on identity has always been an appealing topic in the field of social science. Usually, individual thinking, personal attributes as

well as social influences are considered as important factors in the construction of identity. Erikson's [1] theory of identity holds that human beings experience identity "crisis" in adolescence during which the ultimate trajectory adult lives

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are determined. Erikson views identity as a process and outcome of human development. Erikson's theory is essential to the narrative approach to identity study. In fact, narrative is by no means separable from identity because identity is considered as "stories to live by" as well as a means by which human beings identify meanings in their personal lives [2,3]. Just as what Burner [4] believes that narratives can capture the meaning in our lived experience and serves as one of the two modes of cognition, the other being the paradigmatic mode that values generalized predictions based on observations. Besides, Wenger [5] has also proposed that central to identity is the meaning one experiences, which is located in its negotiation: Our identities are mutually defined by the way we experience ourselves through participation in communities and the ways we are rectified by ourselves and others. Therefore, identity construction is meaningful, dynamic and ongoing process that takes place in social interactions. In this way, identity can be studied in a micro, discursive way to find out how it is built, developed, shaped and reconstructed in naturally occurring discourse.

Career identity, also known as career ego, is a very crucial concept in the field of career development research. It has close relationship with one's career choice, career exploration and career success. Therefore, career identity can help to offer a more flexible basis for identity construction as well as define who one is and how one should act in the changing career context [6,7]. Some scholars believed that career identity refers to individual's personal view on career interest, talent and career goals, which is something dynamic and ongoing with the social learning process [8]. However, simply speaking, career identity is defined as the understanding of oneself as a professional [9].

Since the 1980s, the range of possible occupational and educational choices has increased dramatically in China. As a result, individuals in Chinese society are faced with a growing pressure to make choices about their career paths. Besides, due to the flexibility and unpredictability of vocational market, it seems to be more of self-directness both in the labor market as well as in the society as a whole. As a result of the shifting economy and changing notion of work, schools are increasingly acknowledging that they have a strong responsibility to guide students not only in their academic growth, but also in their career

development [10,11]. However, career guidance in education is still primarily based on the trait-and-factor approach [12,13]. In this approach, focus is primarily placed on achieving the best possible match between the skills and the individual and the "right" education, training or job opportunities. Students are expected to match their skills with education, training and job opportunities efficiently. What's more, they should have enough information about their own skills, preferences and personality as well as the educational training and job requirements. However, the fast-changing world requires competitive practitioners who pursue their study on whatever knowledge and skills that are necessary for future career. Besides, although most of the youth already have an occupational preference during their education and training, this preference often turned out to be either rather unstable (primarily for those with a lower education) or so vague that many options were often kept open (primarily by those with a higher education) [14,15,16]. Therefore, the acquisition of knowledge and skills and the cultivation of career identity should be life-long, dynamic, extensive and socially-adaptive.

Nearly 40 years of opening-up to the outside world make Chinese people to learn English in almost every place. Now a huge number of employers add English proficiency as a must in their recruitment advertisements, for example-the demand for CET 4 (College English Test (Band 4)) or CET 6(College English Test (Band 6)). However, the fact is that many college students, especially non-English majors, have failed to meet the English proficiency standards proposed by the employers. Therefore, they find it is hard to find a suitable job because of their English incapability. According to a study by some Chinese researchers, it is more likely for a graduate student to find a job if his English is better than his peers [17]. Without a visual and achievable goal and an effective learning approach in English learning, a graduate student can hardly achieve career success.

There are some other researchers who have studied the effects of language learning for career success in general. McManus et al. [18] have found that English language proficiency is one crucial factor that influences the income of Hispanic workers in American labor market. Azam et al. [19] have conducted a study on the huge returns to English-Language skills in India. Liu and Zhang [20] have done a close study using micro-data from Chinese General Social

Survey (CGSS) and they note that for middle or higher income Chinese people in city labor market, the rate of return of foreign language proficiency level is positively correlated with their income level. Liu [21] further notes that the wage premium caused by English proficiency can well explain why there is an “English craze” after China’s opening-up to the outside world. Although English language proficiency is crucial to career success and economic growth, it has been found that the quality of China’s foreign language education has urgent need to improve in general [22]. In sum, previous studies have mainly focus on the relationship between personal material gains or national economic growth and English learning, few researchers focus on the process people construe their own career identity through English learning in the labor market, which is also significant for social, psychological as well as pedagogical studies. As what Peirce [23] writes, “It is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time”. In other words, people’s identities are shaped by and through their language use. Therefore, the present study aims to explore two aspects: (a) How the participants career identities (especially career goals) exert influence on their English learning experience? (b) How the participants English learning experience reconstruct their career identities?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In order to explore further on the interrelationship between career identity and English learning for Chinese university graduates, a semi-structured interview was made. The interview intended to discover 2 Chinese university graduates about their motives and actions when they learned English and tried to find out their relationship with career identity under social context. During the semi-structured interviews, the conversations were recorded and then transcribed. If any piece of the recording sounded unclear, a phone call would be made to the interviewee in order to make sure that every note was reliable. In fact, I did not conceive my role as a researcher to dominate my relationship with the interviewees, as I thought this might create too much distance for us. Therefore, the interview was conducted in a very friendly and warm atmosphere.

### 2.1 Participants

This article focused on 2 participants: L and X, and the author (P) served as the interviewer. The

two participants in the research had been informed that this study would be conducted solely for academic purposes and they had agreed to expose their personal information in the research to maintain the reliability of the study. Both of the two participants were Chinese male university graduates. L was 27 and he has been working in an international trade company for more than 1 year as a foreign trade specialist, while the other one was 23 and had just passed the entrance examination of Graduate Institute of Interpretation and Translation (GIIT) in Shanghai International Studies University, which was universally acknowledged as the best GIIT in China. X wished to become an excellent interpreter in the future. Although their learning and working experiences were quite different, they both loved English very much and devoted much time to English learning for different career expectations. In fact, I am an insider to them: I am a very good and intimate friend to both of them. We received similar education when we were at university. We help each other a lot in our daily lives and often take time to communicate with each other. The relationship between my participants and me is not as simple as the relationship between the interviewees and the interviewer. I did not just record and analyze the language output of the students but I engaged them as joint participants in discursive work, in which my own voice was also present. This complicated relationship between the researcher and the researched offered different perspective for the research findings and interpretations.

### 2.2 Procedures

The semi-structured interview was designed and conducted in June 2015. The design, organization and implementation of the semi-structured interview was made by the author. The semi-structured interview was in the form of telephone interview and each question and answer was recorded. There was a parallel contrast between the responses of the 2 interviewees on each part of the interview. The questions were quite similar, which focused on the following diversified topics: the family influence on English learning, the relationship between career dream and major choice, English learning approaches and career success, the influence of work/internship on English learning.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The content of interview with the two interviewees were carefully designed and

executed. Firstly, the author tried to discover their family backgrounds because family backgrounds may exert great effect on major choice and passion for English learning. Then the interview explored how they chose their major at university and its relationship with their English learning. The interview went on to detect their main approaches to learn English and how their working experience/internship reshaped their minds in English learning. At last, conclusion was reached on what the author has found about the interrelationship between their career identity and their English learning.

P: Can you tell me something about your family background and its influence on your English learning, L?

L: OK. There are four people in my home. They are my mother, my father, my elder sister and me. My sister has been in Guangdong since she got married here. My mother and my father also have worked in Guangdong for many years. That was why I chose to work in Guangdong, I wanted to see my families more often here. My parents' education level is quite low. They cannot offer me much help in learning English, so I decided to learn English by myself at school. Luckily, my English was not bad. That was primarily due to the presence of my junior middle school English teacher-she was a young, beautiful and kind and she often devoted her private time to tutoring my English. That really impressed me a lot and I got better and better in English. Later, I found myself fell in love with American TV series, which established my profound love for both English language and western culture.

Born in a common Chinese family, Liu had little chance to study English from his parents, but he never gave up his enthusiasm for his English learning. With the selfless help from his teacher, he found a correct way to learn English and fell in love with western culture. That gave rise to a great impact on his future career and established his career identity as choosing a career that used English often.

P: Can you tell me something about your family background and its influence on your English learning, X?

X: I have a family of four, my mother, my father, my younger sister and I. My family is very democratic, when we have something to deal with, we will sit down and talk with each other until the problem is settled. My father is very good at writing while my mother is quite eloquent

in speech. My younger sister studies earnestly. Under this family environment, I naturally cultivate a calm personality in my early childhood. My family is very special too. My great grandfather was an overseas Chinese who used to be a judge in New York High Court of Justice, which impressed me a lot in my journey of learning English. But the one who exerted greatest impact on my English learning was my mother, who used to ask me to do dictation after class every evening. So I took great interest in English even in my early childhood.

It can be seen from the interview that X's family has exerted tremendous influence on him in learning English in his childhood. He has a very excellent command of English partly due to his early training at home by his family, which has set up a solid foundation for his deep love for English and future inclination of a career path of English. That is to say, his career identity has somehow influenced early by his family by enhancing his enthusiasm for English learning. Let's then take a brief look at how they chose their majors and how the majors they have chosen affect their way of English learning.

P: Have you ever thought about choosing English as your major, L?

L: Yeah, I loved English very much and once I dreamed of becoming an English major when I went into university. That was the time when I was still at senior high school. Much as I loved English very much, I did not get a high score in my college entrance examination, therefore I had a quite limited universities and majors to choose from. I did not choose English major at last, but I did not give up my passion for English and effort on English. So I managed to pass the CET-4 and CET-6 at college, which helped me a lot in finding a job.

It can be found in the interview that Although L did not choose English as his major; he worked very hard at English when he was at college. Despite his lack of professional training in English, he successfully passed CET-4 and CET-6, which many non-English majors failed to do. This has built his confidence in his English learning and his future work as a foreign trade specialist at an international trade company. In fact, before L graduated from college, he has made up his mind to combine his major-business management and English together. Therefore, the English learning experience has dramatic changed his career identity and career choice.

P: Why you chose English as your major, X?

X: I was reluctant to choose English as my major, you know. My score of college entrance examination just passed the second tier admission line. I loved Spanish so much, however, it usually required a score above first tier admission line which was much higher than my score. However, as I chose English as my major, I decided to learn it as best as I can. Because of the limited qualified teachers in our university, we did not have any interpretation classes. However, to be an interpreter have always been my future career plan and something I will stick to. Although we had no specific guidance on interpretation, I searched online for interpretation materials by myself. I scrambled all the way in learning English, facing a huge number of difficulties. For example, I have never been a contestant in any national competition nor have I done any interpretation in real sense. Luckily, I was enrolled in the Graduate Institute of Interpretation and Translation SISU. Now, I do hope I can make more progress in the best GIIT in China and finally become an excellent interpreter in the future.

We can find from the dialogue that X did not regard English as his first choice before he went to university. However, when he went to university to study English, he made up his mind to make every effort to learn it as much as he could. To be an interpreter is something he decides to pursue all his life. Actually, X has successfully combined English learning and his career goal perfectly well. He has regarded himself as an active English learner and the future career path is very clear to him. The excellent command of English is the basic foundation of his future career as an interpreter. In order to realize his career goal, X has nothing but to try his best to study English quite well. Therefore, it is necessary for us to take a stance at how L and X learn English in their daily lives.

P: What approaches you have adopted in your English learning at university, L?

L: When I was at university, I bought learning materials for CET-4 and CET-6. At that time, my major concern was to pass the exam as quickly as possible. In fact, in my school life, I enjoyed watching American movies and American TV series. Little by little, I found my choice of English words was becoming more and more accurate. However, I felt my English capability

was far from enough, which meant that I cannot deal with my routine work in English with ease when I began to work after graduation. Therefore, I started to learn English by adopting English-learning app on my cell-phone and learn English through it.

It can be seen from the dialogue that L has adopted very effective and relaxing approaches to study English in his daily lives, for example, watching movies and TV series, learning English from online app and so on. He has found that the English he has learned at the university is not sufficient for his work. In order to make his work go on smoothly, he has to try every means to learn English by himself. The career bottleneck in his work has re-triggered his passion for English learning.

P: How did do learn English in your daily life at university, X?

X: Well, in my school life, I used to explore new English expressions around me. For example, I loved to play sports, so whenever I came across a sports word, I always kept it in my mind. If there was a big event on television, I would watch the TV and remember the city and country where it took place. Besides, I read a lot of foreign magazines, like Economist, New York Times, Financial Times and so on. I also took great interest in international relations, education, environment protection and finance. What's more, I would practice interpretation skills when I sang songs in the KTV. It is interesting, isn't it?

We can find from the above dialogue that X practiced English a lot. Apart from common ways of learning English, such as memorizing English words, reading foreign magazines, he even practiced interpretation when he sang songs in KTV. That was partly because of his love of English but also because of his future career dream of becoming an interpreter. The interview continued to explore how their working experience or daily internship reconstructed their English learning.

P: Could you please tell me how your work experience changed your way of English learning, L?

L: OK. For example, now I am working in an international trade company which requires a lot of use of English. However, when I communicate with foreign clients, I find that my knowledge about English is far from being enough. So I

continue to learn more English in related fields after work. In my opinion, not only do I need to learn English language well but also I have to learn more and more about English culture.

Both a lack of language skills as well as insensitivity to cultural diversity can cause problems in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, L decides to study English after work and tries every means to learn English culture now. Actually, it's his career choice and career demand that push him to move on and foster his passion for English learning.

P: Have you had internships at university or after graduation? How the internships reconstructed your idea on English learning?

X: I would like to classify my internships at university into tutorship and interpretation practice. Tutorship has pushed me to use my English learned in school into practice and through long-term oral English teaching I have improved my English as well. Interpretation practice has exerted huge impact on me because I have learned many specialized words during my work. Also, I have realized that the importance of short-time memory. In the future, I have to train myself more in short-time memory rather than note-taking. That is to say, the internship has given rise to new perspective and reflection in my English learning.

We can find in the conversation that through the internship in school X found that his English has been improved. Besides, the approach to English learning dramatically altered because of his internship, which will in turn help with his English learning. Thus, the internship and English interact reciprocally with each other in building one's career identity.

Although through semi-structured interview we have explored the interrelation between career identity and English learning for Chinese university graduates, there is some room for improvement. Limitations of this study include the limited number of the participants involved and only semi-structure interview was applied to this study. The two participants both major in humanities and social science and show comparative strong English capability than their peers at the same age. Future study can apply different approaches in exploring diverse samples of different English level from different branches of academic disciplines over China.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This article explores how 2 Chinese university graduates' career identity interacts with their English learning experience. Four years of university education plus internship or working experience have endowed both interviewees a new perspective towards their career identity and English learning. In the real working experience, the participants all come across weakness in their English learning. Therefore, they adopt new and effective approaches to study English. Besides, it can be found that family background or parental support is a very crucial factor for one's career choice, which coincides with previous study [24,25]. For the Chinese university English learners, they are more likely to be in a profession that is closely related to English if they can learn English better than their peers. The enthusiasm and efforts in English learning can also be a driving force for their work and vice versa. In fact, English is not only an important form of cultural capital in the globalizing world, but also has become a means of promoting social mobility [26]. Despite decades of increasing budgets on English learning in China from government, educational institutions as well as parents, it is suggested the cultivation of English language knowledge and skills should be closely combined with parental support, learning interest, social practice, appropriate learning methods and personal reflection based on this study. By combining all these together, students are expected to become active, capable, responsible, socially adaptable and life-long learners and cooperators, rather than passive, narrow-minded knowledge receivers. Therefore, the establishment of career identity and English learning is interactively involved, which means one can deny the importance of their roles in the construction of an individual's career path in any sense.

## CONSENT

The author declares that the oral informed consent was obtained from the participants of the study prior to participating and they were informed that the results will be published purely for academic purposes.

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

Although human subjects were involved, their consents were orally obtained and their names were omitted. There was no foreseeable risk to

participants so the author did not find it necessary to obtain ethical approval from Beijing International Studies University review board. The study is not against any public interest.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has declared there no competing interests exist.

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