

On Influence of Family Background on English Learning at Compulsory Stage in Shanghai, China¹

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Abstract

The social reform and opening-up in Chinese society in the last three decades have resulted in overall changes in almost every aspect of social life of its people. As an important indicator in these changes, English has become an important tool in education for students to move ahead to a higher level of schooling, and better jobs in the employment. A new challenge, thus, emerges as English learning is controversially related to sociocultural and economic factors of the family. This study then aims to answer whether the family background in terms of social, cultural and financial status would affect the outcomes of English learning at the compulsory stage of education in Shanghai, and to what extent this influence works on the school education. The study, based on the surveys of 2034 students and 1640 their families together with interviews with students and teachers has found that English language learning has become a highly commercialized subject in Shanghai and the students and their families were widely involved as the major part of the customer-base due to the defective quality of instruction in the school classrooms. The study has found that in general there are correlations between the family background and the learning outcomes. However such correlations are not intrinsic in the process and mechanism of language learning. They affect the teaching and learning of English as foreign language within certain constraints.

Background

China began to reopen itself to the world in 1976 and since then enthusiasm for learning English has turned into a nationwide movement. Shanghai, in particular, is known as a Chinese vanguard to contact the rest of the world. In today's Shanghai, typical of Chinese drive to modernization, the ability to use English means a good job, better promotion in business and government, and more opportunities to go to a good university as reported extensively in Chinese media (Shanghai Times, 2003; Li, 2003).

Given this social milieu, expectations of English language teaching and learning outcomes are high with great pressures on schools and English language teachers. Studies show that the choice of foreign language teaching in Asia has been a movement of diversification (Lambert, 1999: 153), yet drive in Shanghai for learning foreign languages

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is in the opposite direction with English as *the* foreign language being taught in 100 percent schools and 100 percent in higher education institutions. Not only is a great favor placed in choosing English as a primary foreign language to be taught, great amount of resources is also directed towards English language teaching and learning.

In the last two decades, English language learning in Shanghai has shown two trends: younger and higher. That is, the average starting age is being pushed younger and younger, while parents expect higher and higher standards in outcomes. Today almost all schools are required to teach English from grade one. (SHMEC, 2005)

The shift toward the emphasis on English language teaching is drastic, reflecting a dramatic rise of standards for learning and teaching outcomes. Ten years ago, the goal of teaching was to teach about “2000 words and a basic reading ability for a high school graduate.” (Tang, 2001) But today, high school graduates should have “a satisfactory command of English in four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) with no less than 4200 vocabulary” according to the new Standards of English Teaching issued in 2005 (SHMEC, 2005). Indeed, in the past two decades, almost every three to five years a round of reform would be launched initiated by the educational administration with new ideas embodied in the new Curriculum and Standards introduced to the teachers, often resulting in the total replacement of teaching materials. School teachers are under great pressure to move ahead with newly introduced teaching philosophies and classroom practice.

The change is not only fast-paced, but also poses daunting challenges for most of English language teachers in local schools. Many of them, who were the products of old and traditional translation/grammar/text-based teaching style found it difficult to comprehend the new requirements and standards. As teachers, they were not adequately trained for the new development and therefore, many of them felt dismayed at the changes.

Teachers are also challenged by their own difficulties in language proficiency. Majority of them in Shanghai K-12 schools were trained in China’s teacher educational system in which they received four-years or even less training in language and a few courses in teacher’s knowledge and skills plus two or three weeks classroom practice teaching in the local schools. Their exposure to native English speakers is very limited, and their achievement in language proficiency is basic skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing with a passive vocabulary of 10,000 and active vocabulary of 5000-6000² as required in the national syllabus for English majors in Chinese universities. (MOE, 2000). In spite of the recent trends for more advanced degree in education such as MED, generally speaking, majority of them do not have sufficient exposure to English speaking culture, and language practice. Two studies show that majority of English teachers at the elementary school levels did not even have such formal training in language. They were assigned to teach English just because they happened to have learned English in one or

² Active vocabulary and passive vocabulary are terms often used in Chinese curricular documents with the former referring to the words that students can use voluntarily in speaking and writing, while the latter the words that students are able to recognize in reading and listening activities. As a point of reference, an English native speaking child at the age of 4 or 5 has approximately 4000-5000 word families (a word family has at least three related forms), and an average university student 17,000. (Hinkel, 2004: 41)

two courses when they were learning other subjects at the college. (Yang, 2002; Yi, 2004: 165)

To make the challenges even greater, Chinese schools are under another pressure from society. Students should take competitive examinations to obtain opportunities of formal higher education as China is in serious shortage of universities. Entries to established universities are very competitive and the consequences are that each stage of education, from elementary schools, middle schools, up to high schools, becomes very competitive. Students at the exit of the compulsory stage (Grade 9), face a challenge of streamlining. All the students should take a standardized entrance examination to bifurcate into two streams: academic-orientated stream and less academic stream. The entrance exam includes three subjects that every student should take: English, Mathematics, and Chinese. And the famous one-child-one-family policy results in massive demand for families to send their child to college. So the examination is one of the biggest burdens on both students and their parents.

These challenges, in mixture, exert a powerful influence on how teachers teach inside the classroom, and how families try to win the rat-race competition at large. Many teachers, then, opt to teach their students like an exam prep class rather than creating a friendly and supportive learning environment. After all, they are judged by how many children they send to the academic track. On the other hand, families tried one way or another to outsource better opportunities from a market-based teaching for compensating the classroom learning or adding competitive edge to their children's academic record. As a result, they have created an enormous market of foreign language teaching beyond the school classroom. The students from schools at the fundamental stage constitute "the majority of the customers" for over 2000 commercial language schools in Shanghai, according to a survey made by a marketing agency in Shanghai (Zhi Lian, 2003).

It is obvious then that the English language learning in the school will be affected by these commercial operators. As they operate according to market principles, the quality of language teaching will vary with the quantities of exposure to English speaking environment, and the quality of instructors. Of course it is not news any more that quality of education is related to the sociocultural economic status (SES) of the student families. However it is meaningful to ask why it is English that becomes vulnerable to SES because scholars generally considered foreign language learning in developing countries was weakest due to the need to promote and strengthen the teaching of domestic languages (Lambert, 1999: 153-154). The knowledge and skills of English, instead of being weakened, have to be obtained through fierce competitions in current Shanghai.

Research Objectives

The study of family's sociocultural and economical influence on education can be conducted from various perspectives. This study aims at investigating how family's social, cultural and economic factors influence English learning as a foreign language at the compulsory stage in Shanghai, China.

Under this general objective, the research intends to answer these three questions:

- a. Why does English language education become vulnerable to the influences of SES? Do the current teaching practices inside classrooms aggravate or reduce the social influences of diverse family backgrounds?
- b. How are the family's social, cultural and financial factors related to the outcomes of English language learning?
- c. Does the study make any contribution to the existing theories of teaching English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL)?

2. Theoretical Framework

The study is conducted under the following theoretical background in the relationship between society and language education.

Language is primarily a social mechanism and is learned in social contexts. Brunner (1981:131) suggests adding to the language acquisition device a language support mechanism. This support system encompasses the social environment in which language learning takes place.

Stern (1983: 338) presents a model on the essential factors that play a role in language learning. Amongst them one is called socioeconomic factor in addition to sociolinguistic and socio-cultural factors. According to his paradigm, the learning outcomes from multiple exposures to target language are different from those from the single, classroom instruction-based exposure.

3. Literature Review

Historically family background has been regarded to be important factors influencing the opportunities of education. Scholars in the West have had many years of studies focusing on how social classes, financial conditions and cultural background had influenced the chances to access modern education (Musgrove, 1966, Burstall et al. 1975, Stern 1983, Okano & Truschiya 1999).

Studies (Zhao, 2000) in China reveal that inequalities in the Chinese educational system were mainly shown in the opportunities to access higher education before 1976. Admission to universities was determined according to political background, rather than academic merits. This system was broken in 1977 when Chinese reform and opening-up policies reinstalled the higher education system with a merit-based admission. According to the study by Li (2003), the educational opportunities in China have become more and more unevenly distributed since 1978 and the impact of family background and institutional factors on the acquisition of educational opportunities has increased. As her study shows, the educational levels that people have acquired in recent years have been the combined result of fathers' occupation, fathers' educational background and the urbanization of the place where people live in different periods since 1949 when the People's Republic of China was founded.

Particularly relevant to the present study was the research that looked into the relationship between language education and learner's social context. According to Stern

(1983: 269-270) Carroll identified a number of background variables to take into account in conducting language teaching research in the 1960s. Stewart then in the same decade proposed a helpful analysis of several factors, and some of them were sociocultural ones that bear up motivation, instrumental values and cultural values of the second language. One study he quoted is “*Primary French in the Balance*” reported by Burstall and his collaborators in 1974. The investigators found a high correlation between achievement in French and the socio-economic status of parents: “for pupils of both sexes in each group of primary schools, high mean scores on the listening, reading and writing tests coincide with high-status parental occupation, and low mean scores with low-status parental occupation. According to this study, the result confirms a general pattern of school achievement in Britain. The explanation the investigators offered is that the home influences motivation and thereby indirectly affects achievement: “Children with parents in higher-status occupations receive greater parental support when they approach new learning experiences than do those with parents in lower-status occupations. This pattern of results is accentuated as students proceed through the educational system.

In spite of these reported studies and others, Stern warned (1983:277) that the relationships between socio-economical or sociocultural factors and language learning can not be treated as self-evident. Studies have found sometimes very clear associations, but at other times the relationships were far less evident. With regard to foreign language learning, the associations are even less clear because “there is a distinct lack of research which compares social class with foreign language learning” (Macaro 2003: 101).

4. Research Methods

The study has adopted a quantitative method in the investigation complimented by qualitative inquiries of interviews with students, present and former, teachers, both inside the state system and in the market. For sampling purposes, the research team divided the schools in Shanghai into three levels: urban, rural and fee-paying schools, from which 10 schools were drawn by a blind sampling method. Although two of them were finally dropped from the research due to the schedule conflict the remaining samples did not affect the objectivity.

Two questionnaires were distributed to 2034 students at the exit grade³ and 1640 their families in April 2005. The student questionnaire requires the students to provide answers to the questions under the broad categories of English language teaching in their schools including the class size, their teachers, and teacher’s teaching styles, their self evaluation of their achievements in English language learning and their general impression of the learning and the learning environment. The students were also required to recall what their learning experience was like at the elementary schools. The questionnaires were administered by the teacher in class before the teaching and collected by the researcher immediately after the students finished them.

The questionnaires for parents were distributed through students to their families and required their parents or guardians to provide answers to questions under the broad categories of parent’s professions, educational background, household income levels,

³ This number accounts for 1.196% of the total graduating student population in 2005.

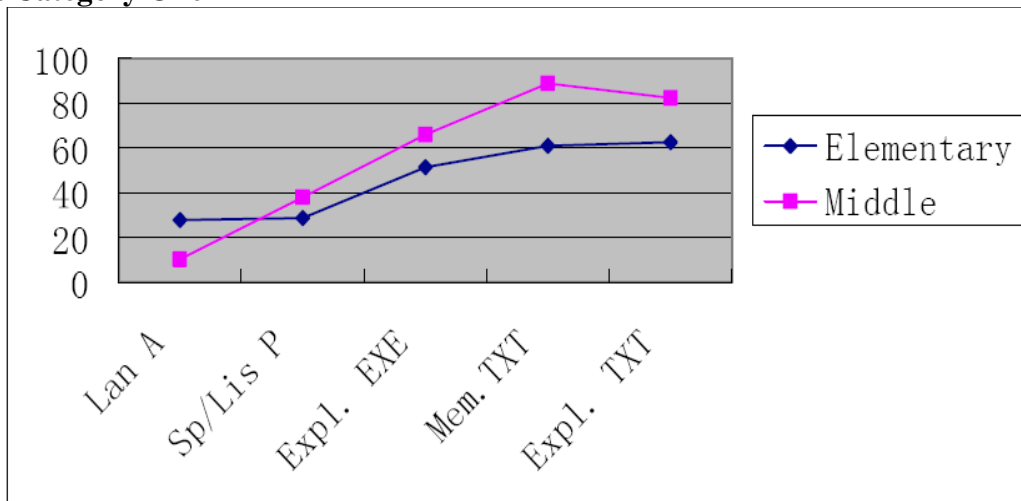
starting age of their children to receive private or commercial teaching of English, types of commercial teaching they obtained and their expenses; expenses on extra teaching materials or equipment related to English learning; reasons for (not) outsourcing commercial teaching.

Then, one English proficiency examination was administered in all the selected schools to achieve a measurement of English proficiency, followed by seminars in each school and interviewed both in person and by telephone eleven former and current students, three current veteran teachers in commercial language teaching business and one marketing researcher in a language teaching business.

5. Results

The data from our investigation fall into two broad categories: those in Fig 1 reflecting a picture of the teaching styles and the characteristics of Chinese foreign language classrooms as experienced by the students, and those in Fig 2 reflecting the relationship between student’s English test performance in relation to the SES of their families.

Data Category One



Notations:

Lan. A: Language Activities

Sp/Lis P: Controlled Listening/Speaking Practice

Expl. EXE: (Teachers) explaining grammar and vocabulary exercises.

Mem TXT: Memorizing passages/texts

Expl. TXT: Explaining passages/texts for comprehension

	Lan A	Sp/Lis P	Expl Ex	Mem TXT	Expl TXT
Elementary	28	28.8	51.5	61	62.6
Middle	10.4	38.1	66.1	88.8	82.4

Fig. 1 Comparison of the instructional modes as reported by the students of the sample schools (Class size: about 30 students, total number of students: 2034)

As is shown in Fig 1, the teachers adopted remarkably identical modes of teaching across the two stages in elementary and middle schools. In this table, the horizontal line represents the types of teaching modes used by the teacher and the vertical line represents the percentages of the students who reported the most frequent way of teaching regarding a particular teaching mode. As the data show, at the elementary school, the highest percentage is on the Explanation of Reading Comprehension Exercises, followed by Text Memorization work, Explanation of Grammar and Vocabulary exercises, and then Controlled Speaking and Listening activities and finally the Language Activities like games or free or semi free language activities. The pattern for the middle school, as the profile shows, is almost identical with changes in the Language Activities drastically decreasing in percentage from 28 percent to 10.4 percent, and the Controlled Speaking and Listening Practice rising from 28.8 percent to 38.1 percent. The importance of Memorization of Text for learning for middle school students is reflected in the rise from 61% at the elementary school to 88.8% at the middle school level. These shifts are attributable to the increasingly pressing demands of helping students pass the exit exam at grade 9 and streamline into the academic track. The teaching emphasis for both types of school is on teacher's presentation of, accuracy and quantity of language knowledge as they are crucial for written tests.

In addition, the relatively low percentage of Language Activities or Controlled Speaking/Listening Practice, in contrast to high frequencies of Explanation, and Memorization of Texts, reflects teacher's reluctance to conduct interaction with students in the target language because spontaneous interaction usually requires the teacher to have a relatively good proficiency in English in order to elicit or respond naturally to the needs of the student's learning. Given low language proficiency for the majority of teachers, it is a safe strategy for them to adopt the activities in class that would maximize the teacher's control. These teaching modes of higher percentages, such as Explaining Grammar and Vocabulary Exercises, Memorizing Passages/Texts, and Explaining Passages/Texts, will allow the teacher and students to carry out teaching and learning in the native language. As one recent study confirms, teachers in the schools in Shanghai tend to switch to the student's native language when they deal with grammar, vocabulary, and explain difficult reading passages/texts (Yan, 2007: vi)

Data Category Two

The data in Fig 2 reflect the information gathered from (1) English proficiency tests that all the students wrote in the study, (2) the students', and (3) their parents' answers to the questions in two questionnaires respectively.

The students were asked to write the proficiency language test ($\alpha=.910$) administered by the research team. The test is designed with no textbooks as the basis of design. But it follows the general pattern of the examinations sponsored by the Examination Authorities of Shanghai Municipal Educational Commission for streamlining purposes with the sections described below.

1. Listening comprehension: Items for testing cover (1) matching pictures with subtitles; (2) multiple choices; and (3) listening and filling out charts.
2. Vocabulary and grammar: Items cover (1) multiple choice responses; (2) cloze of conversations and reading passages.
3. Reading comprehension: Items include (1) reading passages followed by multiple choice questions; (2) minimal written response to reading passages.
4. Writing: Students were required to write a short passage in about 100 words about their school, and their school life.

The study first correlates the student's performance in the proficiency test with their SES information gathered from the two questionnaires as shown in Fig 2 below.

Family Background	Ranks	N	Mean Test Scores	SD	F-value	Sig.	Post Hoc Multiple Comparison
Family Social Status	High	76	62.68	19.99	F = 15.72	p = .000	Tamhane's T2: L - M: p = .001 L - H: p = .070 M - H: p = .610
	Middle	193	65.43	16.48			
	Low	1191	57.51	19.64			
Parents Education Level	High	130	65.63	17.09	F = 17.522	p = .000	LSD: L - M: p = .000 L - H: p = .000 M - H: p = .002
	Middle	804	59.93	19.22			
	Low	526	55.47	19.66			
Family Economic Status	High	158	63.79	19.85	F = 26.708	p = .000	LSD: L - ML: p = .000 L - MH: p = .000 L - H: p = .000 ML - MH: p = .000 ML - H: p = .000 MH - H: p = .701
	Mid-High	433	63.12	17.70			
	Mid-Low	638	57.70	19.34			
	Low	231	50.50	19.31			

Fig 2: The results of one-way variance analysis of the relationship between SES and English proficiency test scores

Notations:

L: Low M: Middle H: High ML: Mid-Low MH: Mid-High

The family background is defined in terms of Family Social Status⁴, Parent's Educational Level, and Family Economic Status which represent the family's social, economic and cultural power respectively. The social status is determined according to the highest social position of one of the two parents. The economic status is determined according to the household monthly income at one of the four levels: High (over 5000 RMB), Mid-High (4999-2500RMB), Mid-Low (2499-1001), and Low (Below 1000 RMB)⁵. The family educational level is defined in terms of three levels that roughly fall into High (college degree or more advanced degree), Middle (diplomas from vocational schools)

⁴ The division of the social status of Chinese residents was based on Liu's study (2004: 2), which is ranked according to the relative positions in governmental departments, agencies, state businesses, private businesses, and free lancers.

⁵ According to the census reported by Shanghai Municipal Statistic Bureau, the average disposable annual income per capita for Shanghai residents in 2004 is 16683 RMB (approximately US \$2034.51 in 2004). (Retrieved March 31 2007 from <http://www.stats-sh.gov.cn/2003shtj/tjnj/nj05.htm?d1=2005tjnj/C1016.htm>.)

and Low (diploma from high schools or lower). Fig 2 represents the relationships between the three dimensions of the family background and the student's achievement in the proficiency test.

As shown in Fig 2, students' performance in the proficiency test is positively related to the social status of their families, with 62.68 for High, 65.43 for Middle, and 57.51 for Low. Although the differences between three groups have reached the significant level ($F=15.72$; $p=.000$), the Post Hoc Multiple Comparison indicates a strong co-efficiency only for the pair of Low-Middle. In other words, such co-efficiency does not exist between Low-High, and Middle-High pairs. The lack of co-efficiency in these two pairs may be caused by the changing social structures of modern China in the past two decades. The twenty-year long opening-up reform has allowed many people to be successful in business even without official status or social positions as modern China is moving toward an economic power sensitive rather than social position sensitive society (Zhang, 2004:207), and this is especially true with Shanghai in recent years. In other words, as more and more private businesses have sprung up, social power can be obtained through financial power.

The second dimension is an old story told in the new era in that the parent's educational levels are significantly related to student's achievement ($F=17.522$, $p=.000$). The group High has achieved 65.63, and the group Middle 59.93, and the group Low 55.47 in the proficiency tests. Co-efficiency can be found in the comparison of almost any two pairs with $p=.000$ for L-M, L-H, and $p=.002$ for M-H. This has confirmed the correlations between the learning of French and the learner's social-economic status reported by Burstall as shown in the review section.

The data in the third dimension of Family Economic Status reveal a more complicated picture than the family cultural dimension. As the data show, there are correlations between income levels and test achievements ($F=26.708$; $p=.000$). The test scores are in a descending order from 63.79, 63.12, 57.50 to 50.50 respectively for the levels from High, Mid-High, Mid-Low, to Low. However, the Post Hoc Multiple Comparison shows correlations between all six pairs except for the last pair MH-H with $p=.701$. Further comparison reveals a small difference in terms of testing scores between High and Mid-High groups with $p=.701$, which may indicate that while financial conditions are important for learning a foreign language, this influence is only valid within certain limits. With this difference in view, it is perhaps interesting to take a look at another set of data which show how much each category spends in paying beyond normal school cost on learning English in Fig 3.

Dimension	Ranks	N.	Expenditures Per student (Yuan RMB)	Test Scores	F-value	Sig.
Family Economic Status	High	158	12132	63.79	F = 26.708	p = .000 LSD MH-H: p=.701
	Mid-High	433	9606	63.12		
	Mid-Low	638	6071	57.70		
	Low	231	2275	50.50		

Fig 3. Expenditures of the Four Levels of Family Economic Status

The data in Fig 3 shows that the families of High economic status spend over 12,132 yuan per student, significantly more than that of the students from the other three groups, and over five times that of the students from the low level.

In plain words, it doesn't mean that one can learn a foreign language better with more expenditure. As revealed by the teachers' comments from the schools investigated, other factors such as opportunities, quality of instruction, motivation, and cognitive factors are also important. So in general, there are correlations between the economic background of the students' families and their achievements in the test. However, taking the data in Fig 2 into consideration ($p=.701$ for MH-H pair) we may notice that this statement does not support the view that the greater economic power the family has, the better achievement the student will make in the test because there is only small difference in test achievements (difference =0.57) between High and Mid-High levels in spite of the great difference in the investment (difference=2526) between the two groups. This discrepancy in data is caused by the high percentage of parents with college education at the Mid-High level (80%), which proves that the cultural status of the family plays a significant role in affecting the testing achievement of the students while the economic power, though important to some degree, plays its role within certain constraints.

Although economic factors play only a secondary role in affecting the testing scores of the learners, its power should not be neglected because economic conditions determine both quantity and quality of language exposure for a learner through outsourcing extra opportunities of language exposure and contact in commercial programs as revealed in Fig 4 below.

Ranks	None	One type	Two types	Three or More types	Total	
High	5 (3.2%)	52 (32.9%)	55 (34.8%)	46 (29.1%)	158	$X^2=114.95$ df=9 p=.000
Mid-High	8 (1.8%)	149 (34.4%)	151 (34.9%)	125 (28.9%)	433	
Mid-Low	41(6.4%)	273 (42.8%)	203 (31.8%)	121(19.0%)	638	
Low	42 (18.2%)	121(52.4%)	54 (23.4%)	14 (6%)	231	
E/Per Student	1830	4387	7006	8978	F=96.735	P=.000
Test scores	56.55	57.59	59.52	61.02	F=2.848	p=.036

Fig 4. Variety of Outsourced Opportunities for Families of Different Economic Status⁶

The data in Fig 4 indicate that the relationship between the level of the family economic status and the quantity of outsourcing. The questionnaire lists eight types⁷ of commercial types of English language instruction popular in Shanghai ranging from the

⁶ Abbreviations used in Fig 4: None means no participation in commercial language teaching programs outside school as reported by the students. Likewise, one type means that the one type of commercial program taken by the students, and so on so forth. E/Per Student means Expenditure per student for outsourcing English language instruction.

⁷ The questionnaire lists eight types of fee paying opportunities for students to choose: (1) employing private tutors, (2) signing up for the remedial classes provided by the school, (3) English classes for school remedial training offered by commercial businesses, (4) English classes for general purposes as taught by trained professionals or English native speakers, (5) English competition training classes, (6) summer/winter camp of English language learning as provided by the trained professionals or English native speakers, (7) studying abroad, and (8) other forms as specified by the student.

cheapest programs offered by the public schools to the most expensive ones provided by English native speakers in the commercial language schools⁸. The results show that majority of the students from the low income group participate in only one type of commercial programs. And they have the highest percentage of None-participation (18.2%). Their high concentration in one type of commercial program differs qualitatively from the students from other groups such as Mid-Low, Mid-High, and High in that most of them only participate in the program offered by their own school because it was cheap, focusing on the school exams as remedial classes according to the interviewed teachers. As teachers reported, most of these students, in fact, were forced by their parents to stay in these programs after school, often repeatedly throughout the year. When asked to explain the reasons for participating in none or one type only in the questionnaire, most parents responded that the cost of the program was their major consideration.⁹

The data in Fig 4 also presents a general picture about the cost and the numbers of the language programs taken by the students. The general tendency is that the more programs one takes, the more it will cost one to learn English in Shanghai. Even for the students of none participation category, they still need to spend 1830 yuan per person on things like extra reading and listening materials or test prep materials.

We would also like to know how the family's financial condition interacts with other factors in different types of school. And the answers we found are presented in Fig 5 below.

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4	
E/Per S.	19028	10974	6531	2812	
Test Scores	75.19	69.64	53.67	60.82	
In/Rate	35	48	34	54	$\chi^2=43.405, p=.000$

Fig 5. Interaction of family's financial conditions with Interest and Achievement

E/Per S.=Expenditure per student

In/Rate=The percentage of the students who reported to have interest in learning English

Type 1 = The schools featuring English language teaching with competitive admission

Type 2 = The schools established according to the new reform policy and managed on the basis of the business model with competitive admission

Type 3 = The ordinary urban schools with admission based on catchments

Type 4 = The suburban schools with admission based on catchments

As Fig 5 shows, the students from Type 1 School made the best achievements in the language test. This is attributable to the fact that they are already best students in terms of foreign language learning as they enter this type of school through competition. They are

⁸ The local government imposes strict regulations on charges for services like remedial classes offered by the public schools in Shanghai in order to discourage the schools from charging the parents.

⁹ As a useful reference, the program offered by the school, strictly under the government control in terms of the price and types of teaching, charged 50 Yuan RMB for 5 class hours instruction a week and 15 weeks per semester for remedial purposes with a class size about 40 and 50 students in 2004. In contrast, a commercial program, taught by a trained native speaking professional, typically charged about 1400 RMB for 25 class hours' instruction with a class size below 20 students.

also unique with the biggest expenditure (19028 yuan RMB). However it is interesting to note that this group has only slightly higher rate of students saying that they are interested in language learning. Interviews with their school teachers show that most of them have had a strong family support by either helping outsource appropriate language programs or having an early start when their children were only five or six years old¹⁰. Although research so far does not fully support the view that the earlier the better in language learning, (Stern, 1983: 366) an early start does play a role in assisting a child in a competitive environment because the early experience of language adds competitive edge to a student.

Another interesting point to make from Fig 5 is the students in Type 4 School. They were suburban school students from the families of peasants or migrant workers living in the community or village where the public school was located. They have the lowest expenditure on the outsourced program of language teaching (2812 RMB). The reason is that there is almost no commercial program available in their community, not even those remedial ones which are often found in the urban schools. However about 54 percent of them showed interest in learning English as shown by their responses to the questionnaire. What's more, their English test scores, on average, are higher than urban schools in Type 3 who has the lowest rate of students saying they had interest in learning English. Given similar family background in terms of economical and cultural factors, students from the urban schools and rural schools present two different scores in the test and the interest rate. Interviews with teachers show that teachers in the rural schools had a closer relationship with their students because the teachers considered themselves part of the local community while the teachers at the urban schools showed a tendency to treating the teaching as a nine-to-five job in their lives¹¹.

7. Discussion

First of all, our study shows that a foreign language classroom is deficient if the teaching overemphasizes the explicit teaching of language knowledge. It may be reasonable to think that learning a language means learning its sound system, vocabulary and syntactic structures, but it is more important that language learning is first of all to learn the use of language in a socially and linguistically appropriate situation in order to meet the needs of learners, (especially young learners) (Sposky, 1999:26). The language classrooms in Shanghai's fundamental stage are seriously defective in this respect, which results in the student's needs to outsource other learning opportunities under the pressure of high-stake examinations. Most of the teachers and students we interviewed responded to this issue with helpless attitudes. According to the teachers interviewed, they felt they should have provided opportunities for negotiation, and interaction, and language use. They also wished that their students would be able to learn English through meaningful and interesting activities. But due to the pressure of the examinations and parents' expectation of the unrealistic outcomes under the increasingly social pressure, they were forced to take a "direct" way to explain language points, or coax their students to learn by sheer memorization, even at the elementary schools. Of course, what the teacher did not say to us explicitly was that many of them were not proficient or skilled in using English when teaching English. In turn, parents respond then by having their children start early

¹⁰ From the interview with the Head Teacher of a school in Type 1 on May 10, 2005.

¹¹ Based on the interviews with teachers from and field trips to these schools on April 12, and 19, 2005.

in order to avoid depending totally on the school for learning English. From the student's point of view, as our interviews confirmed, they were either forced to learn in the commercial programs by their parents or because they did not like the teaching inside their school classrooms. Some of them said the teaching of English in their schools was so "dead" that they would have lost hope to continue if not for the commercial classes and discovering that English language learning could be an interesting experience in other environment¹². This study has shown that learners' confidence is largely determined by the quality of instruction in response to the student's needs in language development. As foreign language is characterized by lack of language contact beyond classrooms, learners usually put their whole faith in the classroom instruction to maintain their confidence in learning. If the classroom is defective, learners will either lose confidence or outsource other opportunities if under the immediate high stake pressure. If this pressure can be traded off by high reward, in the form of getting into good universities, hence better jobs in the future, families that understand the importance of education will help their children by searching for better learning opportunities from the different sources, and with Shanghai, one of the most commercialized cities in China, these resources are abundant. And the only condition to obtain them is money. Therefore it is not difficult to understand the relationship between a family's SES on the learning and teaching of English in Shanghai. As our data support, the family SES is one of the factors that is positively correlated to the achievements in English learning. Thus our first question "Why does English language learning become vulnerable to social inequalities?" has been answered. And the prevalent modes of teaching in Shanghai in fact aggravate this vulnerability.

Our second point to make in this study is that there are complex relationships between language learning and the influence of SES of the family. According to our data, about 93.36% school students (as indicated in Fig 5) were involved in one way or another with outsourced language teaching programs. So the teaching of English has become a highly commercialized business in today's Shanghai. With such a wide involvement of the society, it is difficult to judge whether the achievement of the students in learning English is the results of school teaching or the teaching by the society at large. For schools, students, and their families, the current situation is both a blessing and curse. It is a blessing because school education is not sufficient to train a good bilingual in theory. A good language teaching result, including the teaching of a foreign language, should involve wider social context and environment (Spolsky, 2000:131), which not only provides a context of language use, but also, equally important, offers multiple opportunities of learning. The learning with more opportunities will certainly be superior to that in a socially and culturally parsimonious environment. Although Shanghai does not have a genuine English speaking environment in which the language is used for practical, communicative purposes, except for some special cases, the multitude of programs taught by the native speakers or non-native speakers, but with good skills of using English, has virtually created a de facto second language environment in which English can be found in a natural or spontaneous use for practical purposes. Learners who know how to select them to their own needs would gain benefits in language learning.

¹² From a telephone interview with a former student (22 years old) on May 25, 2005, and an interview by a former student (18 years old) on May 30, 2005.

Just as it is an advantage, the wide range of social involvement in English learning is also a curse for many people. In this sense, we will see the complex interaction between cultural factors, economic conditions and social power of a family. Facing with so many high stake examinations in Chinese educational system and with so high a stake in future employment opportunities, families, no matter poor or rich, have to make extra investment in their children's learning of English in Shanghai. For some families this extra investment may become a serious burden in finance. As our data show, the highest none participation rate is with the group of low economic status, in a striking contrast to the high rate of participation with other three groups. Not only is it a financial burden, it is also culturally overwhelming for some of them to understand the importance of learning English because English is obviously not in their immediate sphere of life. One of the students interviewed by the researcher reported, "I did not truly understand the importance of learning English when I was in the middle school because it seemed then so far away from my life¹³." When asked in the interview how he viewed other students who put in so much energy learning English, the boy replied quite bluntly "I thought they were stupid to learn the things that were not part of their lives." For many of them, as the reported by both school teachers and commercial providers of language teaching, the students from low SES families were reluctant to learn English, or learn it well¹⁴.

Another important point this study is to make is that the sociocultural and economic background of the family is not an intrinsic factor for language learning. Although these factors affect the process of education, the opportunity to access education, the results of education, and hence the educational equality in a sociological sense, social cultural and financial factors are only peripheral in influencing the learning process and learning mechanism of a student. The strongest proof is that all groups show great values in standard deviations regardless of family backgrounds in whatever terms. This means in each group there are both good outcomes and poor outcomes, which reveal that the influence of the family background is within some constraints. The learning outcomes of a foreign language are the results of the interaction of many factors, including social, cultural and economic factors as the last three factors will influence the learner's motivation, attitude, and the ability to source opportunities and quality of language exposure.

7. Conclusion

Given the current social environment in Shanghai, one's proficiency in English is gradually becoming one of the survival skills for the future students in Shanghai, maybe in China. It has achieved the equal status as Chinese and Mathematics in importance in the school curriculum. But English is much more expensive to learn as a foreign language. And therefore the issues of educational equity in English education pose a potential threat to China's ambition for an equal, harmonious, and modern society.

The theoretical point of this study confirms the view that family background is an important aspect in the conceptual framework of second/foreign language education. Specifically language learning is not just a matter of personal endeavor although it is very

¹³ From an interview with a former middle school student (17 years old) on June 9, 2005.

¹⁴ Based on the interviews with teachers from a school, a teacher in the commercial training class, and a marketing researcher.

important. A social support system is important to the paradigm of foreign language learning proposed by Stern (1983). This paper has partially answered Macaro's challenge about the scarcity of study about the social class and their relationship to foreign language learning. The students of different social backgrounds not only have different attitudes to language, they also display different views towards ways of learning a foreign language. And these differences are the results of the interaction of quality of school instruction, family conditions and the social environment.

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