

What does Bourdieu Mean by the ‘Habitus’ and What Implications does This Idea Have for English Language Teaching in China?: Using Bourdieu: Introducing Habitus, Field and Capital

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ABSTRACT

Habitus remains an ambiguous and cryptic concept, triggering drastic debate not only in sociology and anthropology but also in culture studies and literary criticism. The topic has been cited by a range of writers, notably Mauss, Husserl and Bourdieu. Even Bourdieu did not provide a clear, authoritative or coherent definition of the term in his work. Due to the fact that habitus plays an indispensable part of social constructionism, which defines our understanding of the world. It is necessary for parents, schools and the government to learn about this concept, and utilize it to guide their education practice and policy enactment. This essay will explore the theoretical concept of “habitus” and its interrelationship with “field” and “capital”. Then discuss the wide disparity in different social groups, in terms of habitus and capital in China. Followed by an analysis of the imbalances in Chinese rural and urban schools respectively, in the field of English language teaching. It aims to help readers better understand the poor performance of students who come from less advantageous social groups in language learning, rather than attributing their failure to their individual defects. The essay will also introduce the 2003 English curriculum reform, illustrate the current status of its implementation in various family upbringing and school locations and put forward some feasible proposals for parents, teachers, students and government to promote social equity in English language teaching in China.

1. Habitus

The enigmatic word, habitus is conceptualized as the dispositions which can be shaped by social practice, both temporally and spatially. On the one hand, it is a linear and evolving mental-construct process^[1], which is structured by one’s past and current circumstances such as family background and education experience, and will also structure one’s state of being in the future. Bourdieu describes it as a “structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” in *the Logic of Practice*^[2].

The dispositions are permanent and convertible, thus habitus, centering on the way we are “acting, feeling, thinking and being”^[3], is static but dynamic as well. To be specific, what we experienced in the past, models our present dispositions and affects our tendencies towards specific choices and actions currently. Subsequently, the options we choose right now will lead us to choose a particular path in the future, and in turn work on our dispositions and the way we understand the world.

On the other hand, habitus reflects the interconnection between social and individual. Each individual might be

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unique in some respects but still share some common features with other people who are in the same social group. For instance, parents from upper class families tend to have more informal knowledge and skills as their capital^[4]. This can be understood as “class habitus”. Objectively, various groups are divided by different social spaces (fields) including class, gender, occupation, region, etc. Therefore, to some extent, it is the external social forces that shape our internal self by putting us into different positions. Meanwhile, subjectively, the social facts will be internalized by personal experiences as part of our dispositions, which will then materialize the social structures conversely. To sum up, habitus helps us think about the externality and internality of relations as well as the process of externalization and internalization.

However, because dispositions are linked not only with past, present and future but also with social and individual, habitus should not be used in isolation, otherwise it will have no difference from “theoretical icing on an empirical cake”. Bourdieu also emphasizes the importance of practices and reveals an “unconscious”^[5] but close relationship between habitus, field and capital. He formulates^[10] their relations as follows:

$$[(\text{habitus})(\text{capital})] + \text{field} = \text{practice}$$

The practice can be interpreted as an end product of the bewildering relationship between one’s dispositions and capitals within the play of the social field. Then what does Bourdieu mean by “field” and “capital”?

2. Field

The original word of “Field” in French is different from the synonym of meadow in English. It means, however, “an area of land, a batter field, and a field of knowledge”^[6], which is defined as a particular social space with its own internal logics, rules and regularities by Bourdieu. The analogy exists between the Field and the football field, but the former does not equate to the latter. Normally, a football game is always held in a square with internal boundaries and an external border, in which players must follow its specific rules and use various strategies and skills to maintain or improve their position. Within this square, limits are imposed on players according to their different positions. Similarly, in the social field, both people and institutions have their own positions and they are supposed to regulate their behaviors accordingly. The difference between the two lies in the fact that the playing ground in the social field is not fixed and is not always at the same level. Some lucky players may begin the game with a certain type of capital, and they are capable of making more progress or even more accumulation of

capital by utilizing those resources, leaving them in a dominant position in the social competition constantly. Therefore, though highly hierarchized as football game, a social field is much more fluid and complex than any game which has been invented.

As presented in the equation above, habitus and field serve as explanatory tools to understand practice. These two structures, both of which are historical and generative, are mutually dependent and promotive under the same social logic. Despite their ongoing relations, they do not match all the time on account of the different logic and history in each of them. For example, students who just immigrate from a rural area to an urban area in China, tend to feel awkward when they talk with their classmates or read English aloud in class. For the reason that their poor pronunciation with accents, as part of their durable rural habitus does not match the urban education context at the beginning of their migration, which is considered “a historical trait (disposition) that takes time to change”^[7] and the “hysteresis effect”. Once they internalize the external urban rules, make adaptations and align with the logics and the practices in the urban field afterwards, they will be like “a fish in water”^[8] again, literally the same as what they were in rural areas.

3. Capital

In his game analogy, Bourdieu describes that capital is the trump in a card game. It determines one’s probability of winning the game in a given field. The term “capital” here is far more than the one we used in the economic sphere. It refers to the available resources (including economic, cultural, social, linguistic, etc.) in a particular field, which, are not distributed equally and will provide various navigation for different people. According to Bourdieu, there are three types of capital. First, economic capital, tangible goods that can be exchanged into money. Second, social capital is a durable network of interpersonal relationships. Third, and most importantly, cultural capital, which can be “embodied in dispositions” (habitus) both physically and mentally, “objectified in cultural goods” (such as English dictionaries and books) and “institutionalized through educational qualifications”. Power and dominance not only come from materialized assets but also can be attained in the form of cultural and social resources.

Looking back at the formula again, the interrelationship between the three “thinking tools” can be understood as follows: Capital, especially cultural capital can be internalized as part of our dispositions (habitus) and can be reified through practice. During this both habitus and capital will be constructed within particular social

spaces (fields). In this sense, practice is not merely what people do, but a complicated and ongoing interaction of an institutionalized field, with the habitus and capital of various acting agents. The theory of Habitus helps us think about new possibilities and assemblies, and reexamine everything with an evolving idea, thus transforming the way we see the social world. Then how can the habitus be applied in English language teaching in China?

4. English Language Teaching as a Field

In the past few decades, English learning has gained unprecedented popularity in China. The motivations for English learning vary from person to person, including both external factors and internal causes. Externally, as a bridge to the outside world, English is closely connected with China's opening-up policy, international trade and increasing presence in world affairs. Therefore, English proficiency is highly prized and valued as one's personal asset or cultural capital in China. For individuals, on the one side, better English skills lead to numerous possibilities and opportunities, including a better university education at home or abroad, a sound job with a high salary as well as opportunities for promotion. Alternatively, some people learn the language for their own personal interest, such as a passion for language or desire to travel abroad. In a nutshell, English is regarded as a cornerstone of both nations' and individuals' development and thus has become a priority in the basic education field and a boundary point of social segregation in China^[9,10].

To improve the quality of English language teaching (ELT), the Chinese government has made a range of top-down policies like revising English curriculums, renewing syllabuses and enhancing teachers' professional capabilities. Officially, the new English language curriculum issued in 2003 clearly specified that the emphasis of ELT in China switched from traditional practices such as language repetition and rote learning to the cultivation of language knowledge, skills, affect, strategy and cultural awareness, aiming at facilitating life-long learning capability and overall development.

In order to implement the new policy within the ELT field effectively, both families and schools, the two most important components in basic education, should take responsibility for spreading the humanistic value included in the new syllabus. However, according to Sun (2012), Cortazzi and Jin (1996)^[11,12], in terms of transforming the English teaching methods, great imbalances lie between the various social classes and different levels of education in schools, which subsequently result in the wide gap in students' language attainment. These are mainly caused

by the discrepancy in family upbringing, teachers' qualifications and teaching resources.

5. Family Background as a Starting Point in ELT

Bourdieu advocates students' educational achievement is closely connected with their cultural capital because usually the cultural capital in a middle-class family, to some degree, contributes to children's ability to understand the school curriculum^[13]. Wu crystallizes the cultural capital in the family education field into two different types: "family cultural resources" and "parental cultural practices" respectively. The first one refers to tangible cultural goods or items that will help students achieve higher academic results in their school work (such as foreign literature books, English Grammar, etc.). The second one suggests parents' cultural tastes or values in their daily life, play an indispensable role in creating a cognitive and cultural environment for the youth's academic prospects and can be internalized as part of children's habitus.

Sun's (2012) survey supports Bourdieu's and Wu's statement, proving family origins are pivotal in one's English language learning during basic education. 6 families are interviewed and observed constantly on a monthly basis in half a year, both children and their parents with different levels of English education are included. Statistics show that Ann, a student whose parents are both English professors with TEM8 (*Test for English Major in China*), certificates who view English learning as a pleasure to experience an exotic culture, as well as a different way of thinking, shows the highest and most balanced English proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Whereas in Arthur's family, where both his parents failed the CET4 (*College English Test in China*), the child experiences difficulties in language learning, especially in listening and speaking. From the interview, it can be seen that English is of great value to Ann's parents' educational practices and career path. As a result, they attach great importance to Ann's language learning and make an effort to create a contributive atmosphere for learning and practicing English, following the principles of "pleasant and harmonious environment"^[14] in the 2003 English Curriculum Reform. That is to say, parents' preference for this language is intensified in parent-child interaction and is gradually shaped as Ann's familial habitus. When Ann enters the field of English learning in school with this internalized dispositions and linguistic dominance, undoubtedly, she will have an overwhelming competitiveness. Apart from that, her parents' expertise in English will also offer her access to academic guidance, doubling her advantages^[15].

By contrast, in Arthur's family, both his parents' educational background and occupation fail to immerse him into a sound English learning environment with professional assistance.

In summary, as the starting point of one's primary education, family origins, with various types of capital, embodied in one's dispositions and tendencies, are a significant determinant of students' educational outcomes. As a result, parents have a responsibility to build a democratic and relaxing atmosphere for English learning. As required in the new syllabus (e.g., watching English movies, reading English newspapers, etc.) enable the teens to construct their positions unconsciously during various cultural interactions within their family.

6. School Education as a Mediator in ELT

With what has been stated above, it seems that students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds are limited to an inferior position because of less cultural capitals in their family, causing deeper social inequalities. However, Bourdieu also contends that familial habitus, in spite of its durability, is transposable with the tides of change, and can be structured by practices as well as a range of rules and expectations, within ongoing context (field) (Maton, 2014; Bourdieu, 1979, as cited in Jorgensen et al., 2014). This means that school education in an evolving social field, can coordinate individuals' habitus with the ELT field and guide students' dispositions from lower class families in line with those top students, most of whom come from affluent families and enter school with desirable habitus which have been shaped in early practice at home already.

In a case study about rural habitus of migrant children who study in schools in Beijing, conducted by Mu and Jia (2016). Even rural dispositions such as different accents, and daily routines, which are normally stereotyped as disadvantaged habitus, and usually disregarded by urban peers, can be proved valuable in a specific field. For instance, during the interview, a floating student shows her pride in her accent because once in a theme activity, her teacher asked students to present various types of languages and dialects. It was this experience that gave her confidence in speaking dialect and made her realize her own uniqueness. Moreover, a primary school head teacher admires the floating students' independence, which is less likely to be seen in urban families. Another principle in Xicheng school also appreciates some migrant student's ability and willingness to share with housework. More importantly, he praised those students as role models in school, attached their photos to the bulletin board and witnessed them develop into more confident talents in the

following years.

All these examples suggest that when certain types of habitus are recognized and valued in a given field, it will transform into capital. In other words, each field only produces and reinforces those values accepted and appreciated within the field and reward related capital by rendering higher value to it (Bourdieu, 1984, as cited in Mu & Jia, 2016). This provides implications to teachers that even students who come from lower social class may have some merits. Due to their lack of exposure to English language in family, they tend to feel embarrassed and show less confidence during English class. The encouragement and formative assessment, the process of producing and reproducing values, can navigate them and propel them move forward. As specified in the guidelines released by the Ministry of Education in 2003, "both formative and summative assessment are required to motivate students in language learning". Students' test results or family background should not be the focus within the ELT field, instead, the learning process is what counts. Also, it is necessary for teachers, the most active agents in school education field, to teach students in accordance with their aptitude as well as in consideration of their family origins and personal dispositions, mediating the disparities between students from various social groups and reducing social inequalities.

All in all, these initiators in the teaching process and policy implementer in the new syllabus, shoulder the responsibilities of transferring linguistic skills and knowledge, values and attitudes, guiding students in their reconstruction of the familial habitus and development of self-confidence. In addition to that, it is crucial for students to adjust themselves according to teacher's requirements and construct their own habitus with cultural capitals in the school field.

7. Education Policy as a Ladder in ELT

Nevertheless, teachers' personal value and practice within the field of ELT in school may make some progress in promoting educational equity from a micro perspective, but huge disparities remain in schools at different locations. The following section will focus on the variation in ELT between schools in rural towns and urban areas.

McKay argues that the most salient differences are teachers' profession and teaching resources. First, in terms of professional skills, all the English teachers in city schools hold a bachelor's degree in English or above ^[16]. However, in rural schools, most of the English teachers have three years or less tertiary education, without professional titles or creditable teaching experience.

Furthermore, the two groups are trained in a different style. Most of the members in the former group have the chance to study abroad, which is not available for those in the latter group. Additionally, teaching notions vary between the two types of teachers. Urban teachers tend to adopt an advanced teaching approach to promote student-oriented teaching and stimulate student's interest. On the contrary, rural teachers pay close attention to the learning outcomes rather than the process (2016).

Although the 2003 English Language Curriculum Reform calls for innovation and transformation in the field of ELT, data presented there is hugely different in urban and rural English classes. To begin with, at the beginning of the session, students in rural schools are requested to stand up and greet one another, while urban schools favor free-style opening. This contrast suggests that city schools have a more democratic atmosphere, whereas the other keeps the traditional pattern. Moreover, classroom language is different. Urban-school teachers tend to use polite words such as *thank you*, *please*, and expressions like *my boys and girls*, contributing to an intimate teacher-student relationship. Comparatively, the language used in rural-school English class includes *students* and *teachers* showing estrangement between them. As for teaching strategies, group discussion, invitation to bid (students answer questions by raising their hands) and invitation to reply (students are free to reply) are widely used in urban schools. However, teachers in rural schools prefer individual nomination, which means students are selected to reply by being named, gazed or pointed. In this way, students in city schools are given more chances to present themselves and communicate with others, thus their learning motivation and interest will be enhanced greatly. The high level of individuals' engagement in urban schools matches the orientation of the new policy in 2003. That is, critical-thinking, problem-solving skills, as well as the ability to collect and process information, which are essential in students' development. Despite schools in rural town lagging behind in the process of modernizing their teaching methods, McKay identifies that there is a trend that the traditional teaching approach like repetition is gradually being replaced by modern teaching methods such as student presentation.

Second, in regard to didactical resources, numerous channels with extensive exposure to English are accessible in cities, including libraries, museums, laptops, etc. What's more, up-to-date tools such as multimedia, internet and language labs are widely used in urban ELT context to provide interactive and communicative learning environment. However, in less-developed regions, teachers show heavy dependence on textbooks and

blackboards. Some of them are reluctant to use modern equipment merely because of their out-of-date views even if it is offered in rural schools.

Consequently, policy is needed to give some privileges and priorities to specific regions accordingly. Wu (2008) analyses the relationship between cultural capital, the state, and education imbalance in China. He affirms that when the state government broadened educational access to junior high schools from 1949 to 1976, children who came from workers' or peasants' families had more opportunities. Nonetheless, when the government put an end to supporting the youth of lower classes from 1977 to 1996, family origins demonstrated its dominance again. Therefore, a conclusion can be drawn from above historic facts that by redistributing the educational resources to disadvantaged groups, education policy can serve as a ladder equalizing the disparities between different family upbringing and school locations.

To improve rural-school teachers' proficiency, the government has planned to offer them in-service training, which will not only equip them with higher teaching skills and language competence, but also keep them keen on the latest reforms in ELT. The China Scholarship Council, a governmental organization sponsoring overseas studies, has been entitled to ensure that 1000 English teachers from the less-developed regions are trained each year. In addition, the Ministry of Education specified the quantities of the after-class tasks in English learning such as 40 hours of supplementary listening and 200,000 words of additional reading. However, the policy is hard to carry out because of the shortage of resources in the countryside. Also, it is imperative for the government to realize the fact that without sound teaching environment and pedagogical innovations, the new syllabuses are less likely to be implemented effectively in rural towns.

8. Conclusions

The "interlocking nature" between habitus, field and capital helps us realize the interrelationship between one's family origins, educational experience and public policy made by the government within the education field. It reminds us of the importance of seeing the world with an evolving idea. Initially, family background accompanied by cultural capital, more or less, is the threshold in one's language learning, which determines whether children will have desirable habitus in accordance with school expectations and decide their possibilities of experiencing success after they enter the school. Later, didactical practice mediates the gap between given habitus by producing or reproducing capital within the ELT field. Most important is the policy, the ladder can raise students

who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or less-developed areas, making compensation for their inferior position within the social field and thus promoting educational equity and social justice.

Habitus also guides us to make a concrete analysis of each specific question. When teachers conduct educational activities or policy makers implement educational reform, both objective factors and subjective causes should be taken into consideration.

China is a large country with a huge population, but it still has a long way to go to narrow the wide gap in various social groups and geographical areas within its complex ELT field. Despite the tough journey, if all the agents involved in the education practice: parents, teachers, students and policy-makers make joint and practical efforts, the task will be much easier and education equity will not be simply lip service as before.

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