

Individual Networks of Practice of EFL Learners at a Chinese University: Their Impact on English Language Socialization

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Abstract: This ethnographic multiple case study, based on Zappa-Hollman and Duff's construct of individual networks of practice (INoPs), explored English as a second language (L2) competence development and socialization process of a group of English-major undergraduates through their social connections and interactions at a public university located in an underdeveloped city in Northwest China. The study lasted for one academic semester and three students were selected as primary participants. Semi-structured interviews, student observations in English-related micro-settings, and associated texts were used to collect data. These data were coded to identify the thematic categories, and then data triangulation and member checking were conducted to select the most representative evidence to provide an in-depth description of students' perspective about mediating their English L2 socialization by their INoPs. Findings showed that factors in the formation of students' INoPs, including intensity, density, and nature, played significant roles in their academic or affective returns from their English learning, both of which had a substantial influence on the students' English L2 socialization. Considering that the macro-setting was a non-English, underdeveloped monolingual society, both educational institutions and individual students need to seek and create more English-mediated interactional opportunities to develop their English proficiency and adapt to local English learning communities.

Keywords: English as a second language socialization; Individual network of practice; English-major undergraduates

1. Introduction

Research studies on English as a second language (L2) socialization are mostly grounded in English-speaking countries, where novice learners become culturally competent members of the host community in the process of language learning and practices [1-3]. However, limited studies have been conducted on English L2 socialization in foreign language settings, especially concerning learners' social connections and interactions. Drawing on Zappa-Hollman and Duff's [4] construct of individual networks of practice (INoPs), the present researchers conducted an ethnographic multiple case study to investigate how a group of English-major undergraduates negotiated their English L2 socialization process in English-related communities through INoPs at a public university located in an underdeveloped city in Northwest China.

1) The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, the research questions are presented followed by the theoretical framework and literature review. Next, the research settings, participants' background, data collection procedures, and analysis are described. Thereafter, the findings are discussed. Finally, the pedagogical implications and limitations of the study are presented. The research questions that guided this

research are as follows: What types of social connections do students build in English-related communities at a public university in an underdeveloped city in Northwest China?

2) How do students' social connections and interactions inform their English language development and socialization into English-related communities at a public university in an underdeveloped city in Northwest China?

2. Theoretical Framework

The researchers employed Duff's [5] notion of L2 socialization as the macro-theoretical framework to clarify the main topic of the research. Then, the researchers introduced the construct of INoPs [4] as an approach for examining participants' English-related social connections and interactions, which was expected to help to understand learners' individualized English L2 socialization process through investment in their INoPs.

2.1 Second Language Socialization

Language socialization was incorporated into L2 language education in the 1990s with similar principles, namely "socialization through language and socialization to use language" [6] (p.2). Broadly speaking, L2 socialization covered all socialization processes in "second, foreign, and (concurrent) bilingual and multilingual learning contexts" [5] (p. 565). In the present study, the context was confined to an English as a foreign language (EFL) social setting, where L2 novice learners might not aim to live or gain legitimate membership in the target-language communities or countries, and even not to master all language rules and cultural norms [5]. However, they are still socialized by language scaffolding from more proficient members ("experts" or "old-timers" who are native or near-native speakers of the target language and culture) to less proficient ones ("novices" or "newcomers"), and also by novice learners' engagement in language-related activities and interactions in these foreign communities [7]. Therefore, learners' interactions in social environments could be regarded as a means to inform the forms of social support that mediate learning for language learners [4]. This motivated the current study to examine the effects of students' social connections and interactions on their English language socialization at a public university in an underdeveloped city in Northwest China.

2.2 Individual INoPs

Zappa-Hollman and Duff [4] developed the construct of INoPs on the basis of the social network theory [8] and the community of practice (CoP) model [9]. Both social network theory and the CoP model, in line with the theory of language socialization, demonstrate that learning occurs in social interactions and practices and forms complex connections among people [8, 9]. Based on these two frameworks, the concept of INoPs was developed to examine social interactions that occur in learners' multiple relations in more inclusive and heterogeneous groups or communities (as "loose macro-CoPs") as well as the influence of these interactions on their language learning [4]. Each INoP places the learner at the center and takes account of his/her (non)academic-oriented (e.g., English learning) relations in different social settings, whether distant or close. Each INoP comprises four constitutive elements: (1) the "core", which refers to the given individual itself; (2) the "cluster", which refers to identity markers that group people with whom the given individual keeps contact; (3) the "node", which refers to key people included in each cluster; (4) the "tie", which displays all connections that the given individual (core) has established with each node in different clusters. The given individual (core) can form "multiplex" or "uniplex" ties with key people (node) based on the clusters they belong to [4]. Through investing in one's INoP, one is expected to obtain academic and affective returns as well as to achieve one's desired identities and goals [4, 10].

The construct of INoPs was employed in the current research as an analytical perspective for exploring students' English-mediated connections and interactions across different communities, and especially for determining important people (nodes) and their influence on students' English development and socialization process. Figure 1 presents a model of an individual's INoP with four constitutive elements and their interrelated relations.

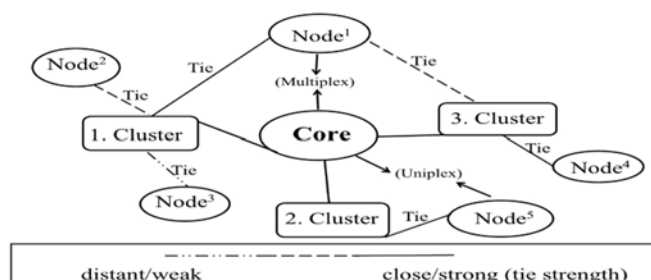


Figure 1. Model of an individual's INoP

3. Literature Review

Research on L2 socialization through learners' social connections and interactions has emerged as a promising perspective. For example, Ferenz [10] adopted a social network perspective and illustrated that L2 learners' academic-oriented and non-academic-oriented relationships exhibited distinguished effects on their L2 academic learning and practices in an EFL context. The author argued that learners' formation of distinct social networks is related to their self-categorization and personal goals. Dewey, Belnap, and Hillstrom [11] found that the language support obtained by a group of Arabic learners on study abroad (SA) programs was related to the intensity (e.g., degree of friendship) of their social relations. In a similar study with the same participants, Dewey et al. [12] investigated the strategies, key factors, and contributors that influence students' social network formation. They noted that distinct social networks might produce different effects on learners' language development. Likewise, in a study on three Mexican English learners at a Canadian university, Zappa-Hollman and Duff [4] developed the notion of INoPs and illustrated how each INoP was applied in the academic English socialization framework. They suggested that learners' informal interactions with people in their INoPs strongly informed their English knowledge in a positive manner and facilitated their socialization into local English-related communities.

The findings of the aforementioned studies shed lights on the current research as follows: (1) learners' language-related interactions in different social settings indeed mediate their language socialization; (2) learners obtain different academic or affective returns through distinct types (e.g., academic-oriented or non-academic-oriented) or intensities (e.g., distant/weak or close/strong) of social interactions; and (3) learners' individual connections are related to many factors, such as personal goals, self-identification, motivation, personality, interpersonal skills, and accommodation arrangements. In particular, Zappa-Hollman and Duff's construct of INoPs [4] informed the current participants' formation and influence of their individual networks on their English competence development and English L2 socialization. However, none of these previous studies investigated students' English language socialization experiences from the approach of INoPs in macro EFL settings. Therefore, the central purpose of the current research was to understand how a group of L2 students' individualized social connections and interactions informed their English L2 socialization into local English-related communities in a non-English society.

4. Research Methods

Following many language socialization research studies [3, 4], the present study employed an ethnographic multiple case study. It was aimed at a thick description [13] and close comparison [14] of students' socialization experiences as they became involved in communities inside and outside of the English language classroom in a macro EFL setting through one full academic semester of fieldwork.

4.1 Research Setting

The macro research setting was a public university located in a fifth-tier small city in Gansu Province (Northwest China). The university is the only higher educational institution in the city with a low ranking among national universities in China. On the campus, there are a few opportunities for students to engage in English-mediated activities, such as participating in an English communicative club named Treehouse and some English speaking or teaching competitions held each semester by the English education department. The city where the university is located is rather underdeveloped and still exploring directions for urbanization and industrialization, but faces many limitations such as remote geographical location, scarce natural resources, and insufficient educational resources. There are limited English-related practices outside of the university.

Therefore, the researchers focused on various micro-spaces in which English-mediated activities and interactions occur, namely classrooms, dormitories, Treehouse, Jenny English training school, and online interactive circles. First, the researchers visited three classrooms (E. 315, 402, and 403) located in the English education department building, where students' course-related performance and interactions could be directly observed. The second space was students' dormitories, which were either unmixed (peers of the same class) or mixed (peers from different classes) based on students' gender. They were reported by students to be spaces for establishing close bonds, working jointly on course tasks, sharing class notes, exchanging English-related information or resources, and evaluating instructors' teaching styles. The third space was Treehouse, the only English-mediated communicative club on campus. Treehouse offers various activities every afternoon for student visitors from all departments to practice speaking English. Every semester, new student assistants (or "managers," a form of address at Treehouse) are selected from student applicants through two rounds of interviews (the evaluation system that Treehouse uses for recruitment), who mainly serve to organize daily activities in turns. Such services also provided opportunities for these "managers" to practice their English-based communicative and working abilities. The fourth space was Jenny English training school, one of the few workplaces where English-major students can find part-time jobs to practice their English teaching ability outside of the university. The school is open for pupils of local primary and secondary schools at weekends as well as during winter and summer vacations. Usually, newly recruited teachers, especially part-timers, are required to receive training on course content and teaching methods. These teaching and training experiences offer opportunities for new teachers to consolidate their English knowledge, and practice teaching English. The fifth and final space was online interactive circles. The researchers examined these circles because English-related topics appear in students' interactions with people over distances through technology-mediated platforms such as WeChat, QQ, and DingTalk. Thus, they hold great potential for their English learning. In sum, these settings were developed as focal micro-settings of this research to understand students' four skills in English and the process of English socialization mediated by students' connections and interactions in these settings.

4.2 Participants

When entering the English education department and comparing the curriculum schedule for each grade, the researchers planned to find potential participants among sophomores because of their relatively light course tasks and potentially sufficient time for participating in the research. After negotiations with four classes of sophomores, the researchers obtained permission from one class as well as the instructors of three English courses, enabling the investigation to begin. Through class observations and snowballing, the researchers became familiar with some students of the research class and invited them for a face-to-face meeting. Among them, the researchers received 11 written consent responses. Finally, through purposeful sampling, which involves selecting “information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” [15] (p.46), the current research focused on three primary participants named Willow, Jade, and Jackson (pseudonyms). Table 1 presents the personal background information of the three primary participants collected through several interviews.

Table 1. Background Information of the Primary Participants

Name	Willow	Jade	Jackson
Ethnicity, Gender, and Age	Chinese/F/20	Chinese/F/19	Chinese/M/20
Major	English Education	English Education	English Education
Length of learning English (years)	14	12	12
Strengths in English (self-evaluation)	Reading, writing, and translation	Reading, writing, and speaking	Writing
Weaknesses in English (self-evaluation)	Speaking and listening	Listening	Reading, speaking, and listening
English level in the class (self-evaluation & class ranking)	Upper advanced	Upper advanced	Below average limited
Working experience (part-time)	Assists teacher at a private English training institute	Teacher at a private English training institute	Security guard, waiter, and construction worker
Professional goals	Translator or interpreter	Instructor at a university	Any stable position (English teacher, cook, etc.)

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

4.3.1 Data collection

The study lasted for one full academic semester in 2021. Data were mainly collected through participant interviews, field notes taken in the aforementioned micro-settings, and related documents, which are discussed further in this section. These multiple data collection methods enabled the researchers to triangulate the data and select the most representative sources for revealing the strategies and processes of participants' English language socialization through their social interactions in this macro non-English society.

① Semistructured interviews

After choosing the primary participants, individual interviews were conducted through face-to-face talks and QQ ranging from 6 to 10 times per participant, with approximately 40 minutes per time. Interview questions covered participants' English learning trajectories, English-related activities and connections they engaged in within social circles, self-reports or peer evaluations regarding their English interactions in private spaces (e.g., dormitories and online technological platforms), and academic achievements and goals. For example, whom do you usually talk about your course work? And what other English-related activities do you usually participate in together? All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, or documented in detailed notes. Moreover, to confirm the information that the primary participants provided about social interactions, the researchers conducted interviews with some members of their INoPs, which were also transcribed or documented in notes.

② Field notes of students' observations in the focal micro-settings

In addition to interview-based information, extended on-site observations provided rich data about the students' social interactions in different micro-settings. The researchers observed and jotted down students' performance and interactions in three mandatory course classrooms (both real and online), namely *Comprehensive English IV* (CE), *Oral English III* (OE), and *Visual-Audio and Speaking III* (VAS). In addition, the researchers visited Treehouse and Jenny English training school to learn about participants' English practices and interactions in these settings, which were also documented in field notes. When taking field notes, the researchers wrote authentic and accurate descriptions of what occurred in these settings based on video recordings and member checking. Table 2 provides details of the main observation settings and some related information.

Table 2. Observation Settings and Related Information

Setting	Content	Observation Time	Students' role	Activities	Frequency/Quantity (weeks)
Classrooms (E. 315, 403) (E. 402) (Online)	CE	Monday/10:20-12:10 A.M. Friday/8:00 - 9:50 A.M.	Class member	Lectures, question-answering;	Total of 19 times/36 hours.
	OE	Friday/10:20-12:10 A.M.		Group discussions, role-plays, debates, etc.	Total of 14 times/27 hours.
	VAS	Tuesday/10:20-12:10 A.M.		Question-answering, oral presentations;	Total of 13 times/12 hours.
Treehouse club	English speaking	Friday/16:50-18:00 P. M.	Manager/visitor	Words activities, mini-speeches, debates, parties, games, etc.	Total of three times/3 hours.
Jenny school	English training for adolescents	Saturday/10:00-12:00 A.M.	English teacher	Preparing the class, teaching, interactions with students and colleagues.	Total of two times/4 hours.
		Sunday/10:00-12:00 A.M.			

E. stands for the building of English education department

③ Related documents

The researchers collected some individual and group assignments of three courses (e.g., essay writing, speech drafts, individual speaking videos, and test papers), course syllabuses, teaching materials, participants' exam scores and overall ranking of three semesters, the development plan of the English education department, and the evaluation system used for recruitment by Treehouse with the help of monitors of the research class, three instructors, and an office staff member. These materials might not have provided direct information about students' social interactions, but they did help to validate and triangulate some information from interviews or on-site observations (e.g., participants' English improvements).

4.3.2 Data analysis

The researchers started data coding procedures by a comparative method [14]. Initially, by reviewing transcripts of the participants' interviews multiple times, preliminary categories and recurring themes emerged in the data set. The researchers kept some open codes for a close analysis in the next step, including English learning opportunities in local communities, scaffolding of instructors, academic-oriented interactions with peers or friends, family support, and personal English competence transformations. Thereafter, by cross-checking the salient or recurring events in on-site observations, the interview transcripts of primary participants, and some members' reported participant connections, more focused codes with a few significant themes were synthesized, such as personal English learning outcomes, and academic support from social connections. With these focused codes as frameworks, the researchers selected and triangulated participants' close social connections and their English-related interactions to construct primary participants' initial INoPs. Meanwhile, by comparing participants' self-report academic improvements and their exam score records and class ranking in three semesters, participants' development of four skills in English on the basis of English-related relations were confirmed, which helped the researchers select the representative connections and "confirming evidence"

segments [16] (p.146) in their initial INoPs directly mediating their English learning. Finally, the researchers shared their resulting INoP representations with primary participants to complete member checking. Three primary participants helped corroborate credibility and validity of data interpretation, and complement and clarify some unclear points.

5. Findings

This section provides an in-depth description of the three primary participants' social connections and interactions related to English L2 socialization across certain micro-settings. The inclusion of three multiple cases helps to show individualized and rich experiences of each case's English L2 socialization mediated by their INoPs. Furthermore, multiple cases can also be used to compare similarities and differences of participants' INoPs under the same category (e.g., influences on English learning), identify which connection facilitates or prevents their English L2 socialization, and explore the potential social support students can seek to negotiate their English learning in this macro EFL society.

5.1 Willow's INoP

Willow's INoP was composed of seven clusters, nine nodes and 13 ties. Figure 2 presents the details of the key people who constitute each cluster as well as multiplex or uniplex ties between them and Willow.

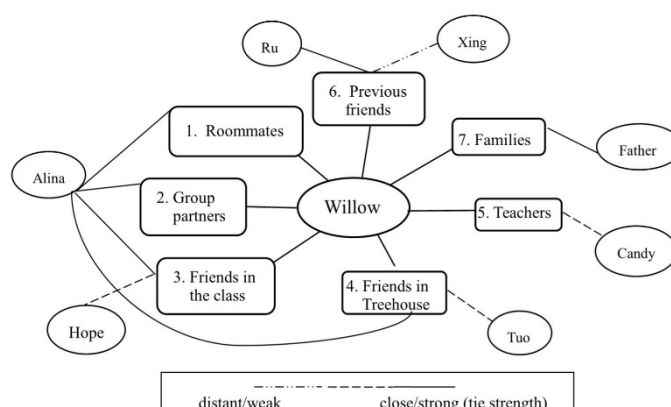


Figure 2. Willow's INoP

5.1.1 Current campus clusters

Willow's campus clusters included her roommates, group partners in OE, friends in the class and Treehouse, and the instructor of CE. Willow was particularly close to Alina. Alina was an easygoing, disciplined, and diligent girl who maintained a similar top position to Willow in the overall class ranking. They shared the same dormitory, worked in the same group in OE, and always accompanied each other to many places (e.g., classrooms, Treehouse, library, and canteens), forming strong multiplex ties. Willow mentioned the following:

"In private, we always have meals, go shopping, study and engage in most daily activities together. We discuss difficult words, sentences, complex questions, or exercises in books (of CE) together...We are promoting each other and learning from each other" (Willow's interview, Originally in Chinese, Dec. 29, 2020).

“In group activities (of OE), me [sic] and Alina was more active in sharing ideas and adding ideas...our cooperation and more oral contacts (practices) has [sic] made my spoken English fluent and specific, not just simple words and sentences as last year” (Willow’s interview, Jan. 25, 2021).

“She [Alina] is a diligent person. Whenever I am lazy when I see her who is studying, I will also tell myself that it is the time to study” (Willow’s interview, Nov. 7, 2020).

To Willow, Alina was an academically outstanding partner in English-related tasks and activities. Their daily discussion and cooperation in course-related tasks offered Willow direct scaffolding both in CE and OE, which was also observed in class observations. In CE classrooms, Alina, who shared a desk with Willow, was noticed to share notes or remind Willow of required English expressions in question-answer routines (e.g., notes of class observations, Oct. 9, 12 and 30, 2020). In the OE classroom, Alina was observed to complement Willow’s ideas or correct her English expressions in group discussions (e.g., notes of class observations, Oct. 9 and 30; Nov. 27, 2020). As Willow stated, her English competence, especially her speaking ability, was obviously promoted through working jointly with Alina. In addition, Alina’s diligent and disciplined learning attitudes, as an invisible driving force, motivated Willow to invest more time and effort into her English learning. Therefore, the strong multiplex connections and frequent course-related interactions and cooperation between Willow and Alina partly assisted Willow in remaining salient in course tasks and classroom performance; enhanced her English competence, especially her speaking, and class ranking; and facilitated her growing to become a capable member of the CE and OE classroom communities.

In addition, Willow got along well with Hope (class monitor) among her classmates, who lived in a dormitory next to Willow’s. In private, members of these two dormitories were relatively intimate, always hanging around in each other’s rooms, sharing snacks, and cooperating in some role-plays in OE (notes from Willow’s interview, Dec. 21, 2020). Hope, as monitor of the class, was highly trusted for her class management capability, and was nicknamed “elder sister” by most girls of her class (notes from a group meeting, Nov. 18, 2020). Usually, Hope was responsible for and authoritative in assigning course-related tasks that needed to be cooperated on after class, especially in the OE and VAS courses, and also for selecting potential participants in class for English-related activities held by the department or other institutions. Due to her close bond with Willow, Hope displayed mental support for Willow’s English proficiency development. In course-related activities, Willow was mainly recommended by Hope to take on crucial tasks or roles, especially in their cooperative group works in OE, such as the chairman in an English debate and the leading actress in several role-plays (e.g., field notes of class observation, Oct. 23; Nov. 6, 2020; notes of Willow’s interview, Oct. 28, 2020); In particular, Hope tended to offer priorities to Willow, as the class representative, to participate in an English speaking contest, and an English dubbing show held by the department (e.g., notes from Willow’s interview, Dec. 21, 2020). Therefore, their close relationship provided Willow with more opportunities to practice her English speaking both in course-related tasks and other English-based activities, thus enhancing her confidence among peers as well as making Willow’s image as the “model student” salient in the current research class.

Next, Tuo was a friend whom Willow met in Treehouse. Willow regarded Tuo as an image of success for her outstanding English communicative abilities. Willow was highly impressed by Tuo’s strong performance in an English teaching competition in which she won the first prize. Therefore, to obtain experience of participating in English-mediated contests, Willow began to keep frequent contact with Tuo. Tuo shared collected materials for English speaking contests, basic procedures and marking criteria of the contest, and

especially, personal experience and tips for preparation, such as practicing extemporaneous question-answering more. Because of Tuo's scaffolding, Willow understood how to navigate her preparation plans for such contests, achieved a high ranking the first time, and accumulated experience and confidence for subsequent speaking contests. The last member of the current campus clusters was Candy, the instructor of CE. Willow often turned to Candy for help when she was confused by articles in the textbook or exercises in the simulated test papers for the National Test for English Majors-Band 4 (TEM-4). In addition, as the tutor for guiding Willow's performance in English speaking contests, Candy helped Willow devise a preparation schedule, refine her speech drafts, and practice her extemporaneous question-answering ability (e.g., notes from Willow's interview, Dec. 21, 2020). After three attempts in English speaking contests held by the department, Willow was selected as one of its potential representatives and began to prepare for the provincial English speaking contest scheduled for Nov. 2021. As academically experienced and authoritative old-timers and experts, Tuo and Candy's suggestions and guidance especially helped Willow to prepare to display her English speaking competence, to gradually grow to be an experienced contestant in English speaking contests, and to win an opportunity to challenge students from major universities from the whole province.

5.1.2 Other social clusters

Other strong connections were with Willow's close friends in her former high school. Willow maintained intimate relations with Ru and Xing, taking to them through WeChat almost every day. Ru played a significant role in refreshing Willow's view toward English as a subject and in motivating her interest in Western social cultures. Willow mentioned the following:

"She [Ru] was good at English, especially speaking and listening. She liked Western cultures, dramas, and songs. At first, I didn't have much interest in English and only focused on dealing with (passing) exams. She aroused my interest in culture. From her, I learned that English is not just a simple subject. I should learn more behind the language, which is very interesting" (Willow's interview, originally in Chinese, Oct. 3; Dec. 29, 2020).

Ru helped Willow to realize that learning English is not only confined to words and sentences, other aspects also needed to be explored, such as sociocultural knowledge in English-speaking countries. During their interactions, Ru shared English songs, movies, and novels with Willow. Through getting close to these English resources, Willow gradually found the aspect of English learning that she was interested in, namely translation-related works. Thereafter, Willow began to select English songs or paragraphs to practice her translation ability and shared her translated versions with Ru to exchange ideas and make refinements (e.g., notes from Willow's interview, Dec. 21, 2020; Jan. 10, 2021). Another friend Xing had the same major as Willow, but she was enrolled at a better university. Xing always shared information and materials related to the English learning with Willow, such as online English-related lectures and materials for the national postgraduate entrance examination of Xing's university, which helped Willow to access more English learning resources, feel determined to pass the postgraduate exam after graduating, and continue her English learning in a better environment with richer resources, as Xing currently enjoyed. Although these old friends contributed little to Willow's daily course-related assignments, they enriched her view on English learning, shared more English resources beyond textbooks, enlightened her to find her interest in English translation, facilitated her becoming motivated to practice English translation every day, and encouraged her to form an academic development plan.

The last cluster was Willow's father. Willow mentioned that her father was a wise and reliable advisor in her English learning. He initially helped Willow to clarify her own strengths and limitations in different subjects, and advised her to choose English as her major. Willow admitted that this choice gave her much confidence and enabled her to have fun in the learning process. Currently, Willow's father helped her collect information and requirements for the postgraduate entrance examination of some universities, and he expected to find a suitable one to support Willow in obtaining another English learning experience. Similar to her previous friends cluster, Willow's father offered limited help in her daily coursework, while his suggestions provided Willow with strong affective support, encouraged her to be more determined in preparing for the postgraduate entrance examination, and motivated her to maintain a constantly disciplined and diligent attitude in her English learning.

To summarize, from Willow's INoP, it was found that most direct and specific course-related support came from her current campus clusters. Alina accompanied Willow to work out daily course-related exercises and cooperate in group speaking tasks. Hope offered Willow priorities to present her English speaking strengths in classroom activities or other English-mediated contests. Tuo and Candy supported Willow in becoming fully prepared for English speaking contests and winning opportunities for a high-level challenge. With this scaffolding, Willow's English competence was promoted, especially her speaking, and was her academic confidence, which contributed to her growth as a promising "model student" in her classroom communities. Willow's previous friends and family cluster might not have provided direct scaffolding on specific course tasks, but academic-oriented topics were also salient in these clusters. Through their interactions, Willow enjoyed more English resources, engaged in English translation practice, and became especially determined to prepare for the postgraduate entrance examination for an opportunity to study further.

5.2 Jade's INoP

Jade's INoP had six clusters, seven nodes, and seven ties. Figure 3 presents the key people who constituted each cluster as well as major uniplex ties between them and Jade.

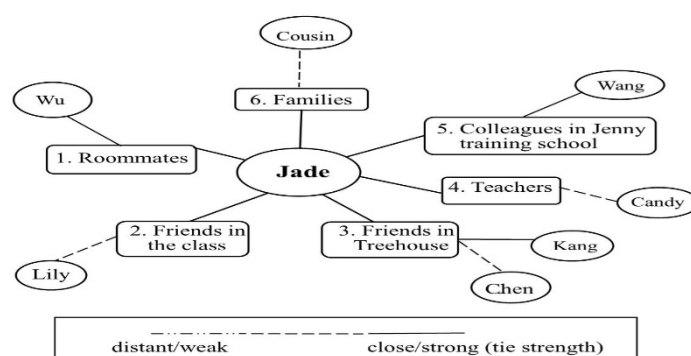


Figure 3. Jade's INoP

5.2.1 Current campus clusters

In Jade's roommate cluster, Wu, as the closest node, had much in common with Jade, especially a studious attitude in English learning and cautious personality, which made them become each other's most trusted friend. Although they were not in the same class, Jade and Wu, similar to Alina and Willow, often accompanied each other in most campus settings after class. Jade mentioned the following:

“From the first year, we like to gather together in classrooms or the library after class to work on course assignments [mostly CE], or prepare for English-related exams. She studies very seriously and is afraid of making any mistakes. When we discuss exercises, especially in listening practices or cloze [paragraph blank-filling], I tend to accept her ideas” (Jade’s interview, originally in Chinese, Dec. 29, 2020).

“Wu is meticulous in making plans for learning. For example, if we prepare for exams, I will follow her to have a clear plan about what to do every day...I become more active and seldom delay. She is good at [English] grammar, and I often ask her if I encounter problems. She also helps me to check my recitation of the speech draft [for English speaking contests] every time, and gives advice on my intonation, gestures, and choice of clothes” (Jade’s interview, originally in Chinese, Mar. 3, 2021).

As Jade reflected, she was influenced by Wu’s serious and meticulous attitude in English learning and daily plan-making when they worked together. This encouraged Jade to be motivated and efficient in course-related tasks and exam preparation, and partly ensured that Jade achieved strong outcomes in course exams and class ranking (see the records of course exam scores and overall class ranking in three semesters). In addition, due to Wu’s relatively high English competence, she accompanied Jade in discussing and working out course exercises of CE, and especially helped her with listening, paragraph blank-filling, and grammar problems. Finally, it was Wu who helped Jade each time to check her recitation of speech drafts for English speaking contests, and also offered feedback and suggestions, which promoted Jade to become better-prepared and confident in participating in these contests.

In the classmate cluster, there was an appealing model image, namely Lily, who was publicly evaluated as the most diligent student in the class. Lily’s daily disciplined learning habits directly impacted Jade as follows:

“I always imitate her [Lily], for example, I will get up if she gets up, I will follow her to start learning if she goes out to learn [English], and I will learn what she is learning, such as TEM-4 papers, or extra listening or words exercises. I especially admire her” (Jade’s interview, originally in Chinese, Dec. 29, 2020).

These imitative behaviors helped Jade to follow Lily in being disciplined to fulfill course assignments on time and to find extra materials for enhancing her English competence. For example, she practised listening based on TEM-4 simulated papers every morning and memorized new words through an online English learning application every evening. The disciplined learning schedule that Jade imitated from Lily pushed Jade to be more diligent and efficient in her daily learning process. Furthermore, the extra English practice that Jade followed Lily by engaging in helped Jade to accumulate a certain amount of vocabulary and promoted her listening in TEM-4 simulated papers and English news (e.g., Jade’s interview, originally in Chinese, Mar. 3, 2021).

In the Treehouse cluster, among the student “managers” who maintained contacts with Jade, Kang and Chen were especially close to her. As an experienced Treehouse old-timer, Kang was another successful model for Jade to admire and imitate. First, through participating in activities that Kang organized, Jade practiced her English speaking, and learned some well-organized activities. Thereafter, Kang helped Jade to prepare for activities, observed Jade and student visitors’ performance, and offered suggestion such as ways to encourage visitors to speak more, warm-up games for improving the active atmosphere, and conclusions to highlight English expressions and usages used in activities (e.g., notes from Jade’s interview, Mar. 3, 2021). All of this

led Jade to gradually become an apprentice new “manager” working independently at Treehouse. Chen was selected to be a manager of Treehouse at the same time as Jade. Chen, as a member of an English-only interactive agreement signed by some peers in private, was the only person in Jade’s INoP with whom she had to interact with in English in any contexts, which particularly enabled her to practice her oral English, especially in daily life. Moreover, Chen liked to exchange ideas with Jade to find more types of English-related activities for improving their work. She also shared some online courses or applications with Jade for practicing English pronunciation and intonation. Through interactions with these peers, Jade improved her English speaking and communicative abilities, grew to organize English-mediated activities independently and successfully, and won popularity as a competent “manager” in Treehouse.

The last cluster in the campus was Candy. Jade also liked to interact with Candy for information inquiries (e.g., English speaking contest) or problems encountered in assignments. In addition, Candy offered similar guidance to Jade during her preparation for English speaking contests (e.g., notes from Jade’s interview, Dec. 29, 2020). As a result, similar to Willow, Jade’s improvements in English speaking qualified her as another potential representative of the department to prepare for the provincial English speaking contest.

5.2.2 Other social clusters

Jade insisted on working her part-time job at Jenny English training school from the first year of college, and believed that such practices would accumulate English teaching experience for finding an ideal job in the future. Among her colleagues, the headmistress Wang maintained a strong connection with Jade. To ensure the school’s teaching quality, Wang always observed her employees’ classes, especially those of newcomers and part-timers. Jade stated that,

“she would come to my class every 2 or 3 days. Each time, she listed many problems about my work, and gave me a lot guidance, such as teaching methods or manners, activities design, and classroom interactional patterns. Her opinion was very useful. Later, I felt that I had a little courage and confidence, and came back to participate in Treehouse” (Jade’s interview, originally in Chinese, Dec. 29, 2020).

According to Jade, Wang offered her the opportunity to engage in English teaching, pushed her to strengthen her English competence to accurately and effectively transmit English knowledge, and provided practical guidance on English teaching. Wang’s scaffolding facilitated Jade in becoming a competent English teacher, contributed to her assimilation into this English teaching community, and promoted her confidence to become involved in more English-mediated activities back at her university.

In her family cluster, Jade’s cousin, a university instructor, helped Jade get through a sorrow-filled time when she failed to enter the ideal university, guided Jade in choosing English as her major, and currently encouraged Jade to begin preparing for the postgraduate entrance exam. Usually, Jade was used to telling her cousin about her course progress, conflicts in learning and work (e.g., TEM-4 test vs. part-time teaching tasks), and inner struggles and learning plans (e.g., the English speaking contest) over WeChat. Although her cousin did not directly transmit English knowledge, her suggestions, such as stopping her part-time job temporarily to fully prepare for TEM-4 or preparing for the postgraduate entrance exam, guided Jade in making suitable decisions when encounter dilemmas or making future development plans. Moreover, her cousin’s encouragement and care offered strong affective comfort to support Jade in being motivated and disciplined in the learning process.

In sum, close interactions were found in several of Jade's uniplex ties on and off campus. Through interactions with Wu and Lily, Jade improved her learning attitude and efficiency, fulfilled daily course tasks on time, and enhanced her English competence through extra practice and activities, which made her gradually become a promising member in her class community. In addition, Jade developed her English speaking, communicative, and teaching abilities through the scaffolding of her instructor, friends at Treehouse and headmistress of Jenny English training school, which facilitated her being a proficient English learner and user in different micro-English-mediated communities. Finally, Jade's family cluster, such as her cousin, offered suggestions on Jade's current and future development plans as well as strong affective support for overcoming her inner struggles and staying determined and motivated in adapting to her current learning environment.

5.3 Jackson's INoP

Jackson's INoP included five clusters, seven nodes, and 10 ties. Figure 4 illustrates the main clusters, key people, and their multiplex or uniplex ties with Jackson.

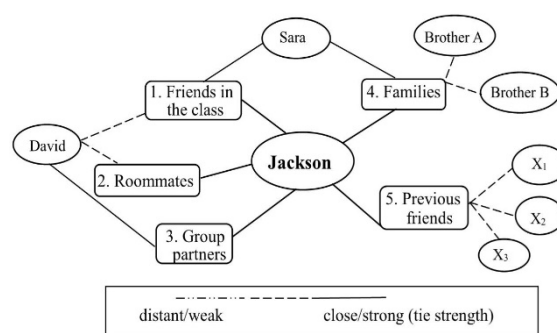


Figure 4. Jackson's INoP

5.3.1 Current campus clusters

Among all of his clusters, Jackson maintained the closest connections with Sara. Sara was in the same class as Jackson, and formally became Jackson's girlfriend in the last 2 months of the investigation. Sara was more active and motivated than Jackson in English learning, with a middle English-level ranking in the class. In their interactions, Sara urged Jackson to finish course tasks on time and provided VAS assignments for Jackson to reference (notes from Jackson's interview, Jan. 11, 2021). However, Jackson mostly finished CE and VAS assignments on time through coping with little personal thinking or examination. Thus, Sara's scaffolding only pushed Jackson to finish and submit course tasks, but the efforts and investment that Jackson actually devoted were still in doubt.

The next person was David, who was Jackson's roommate and group partner in OE. David's English competence was slightly better than that of Jackson due to his motivated learning attitude. Their interactions were mostly limited to OE group work. Although it was observed that David mostly led the discussions and Jackson was pushed to cooperate to exchange ideas in turns (e.g., field notes of class observation, Oct. 30; Nov. 27, 2020), their interactions somewhat motivated Jackson's efforts and investment in group tasks, created opportunities for Jackson to practice his English speaking, and helped Jackson to become prepared to present their group ideas or performances to the class.

Overall, due to Jackson's passivity and reluctance to invest in English learning and more English-related connections, few peers in his current campus clusters provided direct scaffolding. Sara and David mainly pushed

him to complete course tasks on time with limited improvements in overall English competence, which failed to change Jackson's alienation and peripheral position in his class community.

5.3.2 Other social clusters

In his family cluster, Jackson repeatedly mentioned one of his cousins (Brother A), who was an English teacher at a local middle school, and impressed Jackson because of his efforts and persistence in preparing for the postgraduate entrance examination after daily work for 2 years. Brother A often discussed the unpromising future of an English-major undergraduate from a low-ranking university with Jackson, shared materials with him for the postgraduate entrance examination as well as English learning methods, and encouraged Jackson to strive for an opportunity for further study. In one period, Brother A's suggestions indeed motivated Jackson to be a bit more attentive in course learning, but quickly became frustrated due to the large gap between his limited English competence and the high postgraduate entry standards. However, through interactions with Brother A, Jackson seriously examined his current situation and chose a more practical development goal — that is, managing to keep up with the coursework and pass all exams to obtain his degree.

In addition, Jackson maintained close interactions with several previous high school friends and another cousin (Brother B). They chatted about their academic goals, exam results, and especial preparation experience in College English Test Band 4 (CET-4), and also comforted Jackson when he struggled in course-related exams. However, most of their interactions were not related to English; for example, Jackson spent more time with these friends playing online games nearly every day, which diverted his attention from learning and hindered his investment in course tasks. Furthermore, Brother B taught Jackson a materialistic outlook for learning some skills to achieve economic affluence rather than insisting on his lack of interest in English learning during their interactions about his English learning situations (notes from Jackson's interview, Jan. 11, 2021). These interactions reduced Jackson's motivation and enthusiasm for English learning, increased his doubts and confusion about his future based on his major, and encouraged him to make a potential plan for non-English professional development. This made Jackson somewhat more inattentive in course tasks and alienated from other English-related activities, and only led to his peripheral attendance in classroom communities for passing exams continuing.

To summarize, compared with the other two participants, quite limited members in Jackson's INoP meant English-related interactions with superficial scaffolding and returns on his coursework. Moreover, most members in all of his clusters (e.g., David and Brother A) displayed a weak English foundation or dissatisfied professional development, which made it difficult for Jackson to find confidence and fulfillment in his learning. Jackson's interactions with his old friends and Brother B also weakened his motivation to further promote his English competence, and reduced his expectations when planning his future based on his English competence. Therefore, Jackson's low motivation, limited English-related interactions and support, and even negative influence from some social interactions confined his passion and investment in his English development, and caused him to remain an unmotivated, incompetent, and peripheral attendee in the class community.

6. Discussion

The current study, through an analysis of three participants' INoPs, indicated that English language socialization can occur in students through engaging in English-related connections and interactions across multiple spaces (e.g., classrooms, dormitories, workplaces, and online circles). The three participants' investment in their INoPs afforded them academic and affective returns, both of which greatly impacted their socialization into local English-related micro-communities. This study also revealed that the function (e.g.,

academic or affective) and significance (e.g., enabling or debilitating) of each INoP in one's English socialization process were related to several factors in the formation of each INoP, such as intensity (strength of ties), density (e.g., closed/high-density or open/low-density), and nature (e.g., English-related or non-English-related).

First, based on the three cases, the most specific and frequent academic (English-related) support was from the connections with their close friends/roommates. The intensity of their connections was increased on the basis of personality, learning motivation, English competence, future goals, and accommodation arrangements [12, 17], which also became the basis for their reciprocal cooperation and joint socialization in their learning process. For example, Willow and Jade became more disciplined and diligent, and displayed salient achievements in coursework through daily joint work with Alina and Wu, their close roommates. Although Jackson did not exhibit many improvements, his girlfriend Sara played a vital role in motivating and helping him in the completing routine course assignments and saved his peripheral legitimacy in the current class community.

Second, through a comparison of the three participants' INoPs, Willow and Jade were found to tend to keep an open (low-density) network [18] by moving the class boundary outward and positively seeking and becoming involved in more social connections and communities; for example, interactions with members of Treehouse, old friends, and colleagues in the workplace. The open network provided them with more English-mediated resources and practices, enabled them to practice their English speaking or communicative ability, and facilitated their socialization into these micro English-related communities. However, Jackson's network was rather closed (high-density) and confined in his previous and current classmates as well as the family boundary without actively investing in more relations, which could promote his English learning. These relations displayed limitations in providing scaffolding in coursework and positive learning attitudes, which partly reduced Jackson's motivation and investment in coursework as well as confined his identity as an unmotivated and incompetent attendee in the class community.

Third, similar to some relevant studies [10, 18], the current study proved that participants' motivation and goals in English learning affected the nature of the composition of their INoPs, which in turn was developed to distinctly affect their returns. For example, Willow and Jade were highly motivated students with strong desires for English achievements, and they mostly maintained interactions with English-proficient peers, old-timers, and experts both inside and outside of the university. The academic-oriented nature of their network enabled them to progress in terms of English competence and socialization. However, due to low expectations in English learning, Jackson only maintained limited English-related interactions with several peers. Furthermore, Jackson's investment in non-English-related interactions with his old friends and Brother B reduced his attention and motivation in the learning process, made him passively engage in course tasks, and became nearly marginalized in the current class.

Fourth, as [17] have noted, parents and some relatives, such as Willow's father, Jade's cousin, and Jackson's brother A, were backup forces in supporting the students' academic or affective growth and in overcoming difficulties and stress that affected their learning processes. Moreover, these connections were especially significant in helping the students to make choices about their future plans, which in turn produced distinct attitudes and investment in their learning process.

7. Conclusion and Implications

Unlike previous studies on English language socialization mostly setting in English-speaking societies [3, 4], the current research was conducted in an underdeveloped region of China to explore the three EFL students'

social connections and interactions mainly linked to their English L2 socialization. Compared with Zappa-Hollman and Duff's study [4] with similar topic, the current three cases revealed that the diversity of clusters in students' INoPs mediating their English learning is rather limited, which can mainly be seen in their connections with current or previous classmates in schools. This also indicated that the English language socialization of L2 learners in a non-English society, especially in underdeveloped regions, is mostly achieved through course-/work-related interactions and practices in educational institutions.

Therefore, educational institutions, especially those in underdeveloped regions, must take the responsibility to strive for a better English learning environment. For example, educational institutions can seek possible cooperation between domestic and foreign universities or cooperation between local universities and enterprises in developed cities to help their students obtain more opportunities of engaging in English-mediated interactions and works, and experiencing intercultural communication in these English-related settings. Alternatively, educational institutions can employ foreign instructors or Chinese instructors with living experiences in English-speaking societies to join their faculties, and also provide more English-mediated communication opportunities and resources. In addition, when educational institutions displayed limitations in students' English learning and practices for some objective reasons (among which financial problems may be key), students themselves need to find alternative ways to mediate their English socialization. In particular, they must invest much effort in classroom learning and interactions. The use of technology in students' English learning should also be widely encouraged and explored to help them adapt to the English-mediated practices.

However, language socialization is a life-long process, and the present study only lasted approximately 5 months, which only captured participants' language socialization progress from the approach of INoPs within a short period. Moreover, topics such as differences of INoPs between male and female students, and boy/girlfriends' influence, were not distinguished and discussed either. The researchers will continue data collection to further examine these aspects. Furthermore, classroom investment and participation will also be included in a subsequent study, thus providing an overall understanding of the English L2 socialization process of this group of participants in a non-English society.

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