

# Second Language Identity of Chinese Junior High School EFL Learners: Its Construction and Sources

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**Abstract.** Language learning is widely agreed to be closely related to individuals' identity constructions. In recent years, identity research has gained more attention for its constructed and dynamic nature could provide a more insightful view of language learning processes and thus help better improve language learning and teaching. Many existing studies on language identities have been conducted in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts and focused on more mature English learners. However, studies conducted in English as Foreign Language (EFL) contexts like China, especially those focused on younger learners were inadequate. With a qualitative research design and using a series of narrative data collection methods, the current research explored the second language identity of Chinese Junior High School (CJHS) EFL learners both in terms of its construction and sources. The findings of the research suggested that CJHS EFL learners' second language identity experienced a downtrend flux as their English learning moved on. Factors including social context in China, experiences in English classes, the direct connection between English and their daily life and intimate people around weave together to build their second language identities. Several pedagogical implications were also proposed to help CJHS EFL learners negotiate their second language identity so that they could better locate themselves in the more globalized world.

**Keywords:** Second Language Identity; Junior High School EFL Learners; EFL Learning in China.

## 1. Introduction

English is taught as a second language not just in Western nations but also extensively in Asian countries since it is the lingua franca of the modern world and globalization has accelerated international movement and contact [1]. However, learning a second language like English could be a more complicated process than any other learning activity as languages are closely related to identity construction.

Given that identity is always constructed and constantly negotiated, the interrelation between identity and second language learning has gained increasing attention among researchers since Norton's pioneering work in 1995 [2]. It is believed that identity theory could provide a more comprehensive and dynamic view of individuals' internal fluctuation while learning a second language. Unlike the earlier works on individual learner differences in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) which simplified the topic into isolated and fixed factors like motivation and learning styles, identity theories locate the learners in broader social contexts [3]. Taking a poststructuralist point of view, it tends to explore the subtle interactions that happened between learners' identity change and a set of variables, including but not limited to learners' nurturant background, social relationships, distribution of power and so on [3]. On this basis, identity research could not only be more sensitive to the struggle learners experience in learning a second language but also be more insightful to how certain kind of decisions is made by the learners in the process. Thus, research from the identity perspective could provide more valuable and practical implications for second language learning and teaching.

Following Norton's original work, much of the existing research was conducted in Western contexts, concerning different social groups [4]. Some studies focused on the identity shift of migrant English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners, who have an inherited language on their own but have to grasp English after immigration in order to acclimatize themselves to new learning or working contexts [5,

6]. Others paid attention to overseas students and explored the identity change that may be brought about by studying abroad experiences [7]. Based on the previous studies, a group of researchers from Cambridge University even developed an identity-based pedagogy [8]. The study not only further demonstrated the influencing interactions that may happen between identity and language learning, but also highlighted the significance of bringing the topic of identity into language classes and letting language learners reflect on language identities in a more explicit way [8]. Noticeably, a common point of the mentioned above studies is that the learners have been exposed to the target language context, where English is used on a daily basis. However, the identity change learning a second language may bring out when the learning process happens away from the target language context is also worth studying.

In this case, the Chinese context must be called for more attention since China is a country with a great number of EFL learners. Although English is not commonly used for social interaction and is usually regarded as a foreign language, the importance of English is widely recognized among Chinese [9]. The uniqueness Chinese EFL learning context may make a difference in EFL learners' second language identity construction. It is inspiring to find that a number of second language identity studies have been conducted with Chinese university students [2, 10]. Also, many studies paid attention to Chinese EFL teachers, exploring their identity fluctuation along with career development [11]. However, younger EFL learners like secondary school students should also be given equal attention. As argued by Ryan and Deci, adolescence is the critical period in terms of an individual's identity construction, and will have a long-term influence on future social interactions [12].

The current research focused on junior high school EFL learners in China. Using a qualitative method, it aimed to give a general portrayal of the second language identity of EFL learners in Chinese junior high schools, highlighting both its generalities and uniqueness. Moreover, the research also tried to explore what factors may contribute to Chinese junior high school EFL learners' second language construction. Hopefully, the findings of the research may generate some implications for improving EFL teaching in junior high schools in China and help younger EFL learners in China better negotiate their language identities so that they can accommodate themselves more properly to the globalized world.

## **2. Methodology**

To get an overview of Chinese Junior High School EFL learners' second language identities and explore what factors could influence their identity constructions, a qualitative research design was used in the current research. Since the flux of identity is closely related to individuals' personal experiences, narrative inquiry is used in the research to collect data [3]. Narrative inquiry is a newly emerged qualitative method which puts its primary focus on participants' life stories [13]. Meanwhile, it is able to take broader social contexts, which also significantly influence EFL learners' identity negotiations, into consideration [3, 14-15]. Thus, as argued by Barkhuizen, narrative inquiry is suitable for language learner identity explorations [13].

Following narrative inquiry formal, triangulated multiple sources of data were collected to get more comprehensive in-depth views of the research questions, as well as to increase validity. Narrative frame tasks, background questionnaires and semi-structured narrative interviews were used together to collect data. When originating tasks, questionnaire items and interview questions, Evan and Fisher's three-dimensional definition of multilingual identity was taken as the initial framework [16]. Also, Clandinin and Connelly's exemplary work on how to conduct narrative research in the EFL field was used as an important reference [17]. On this basis, all the data collection tools in the present research were produced from three perspectives, respectively experience of English, evaluation of English and of oneself as an EFL learner, and emotional response to English and English learning, following a timeline of past, present and future [16-17].

The data collection process was divided into two stages. For the first stage, 45 Grade Eight students from a public junior high school in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, China were involved. After being informed of the purpose of the research and receiving consent from their parents and the school, they finished a series of narrative frame tasks related to their subjective evaluation and emotional response to English and English learning [13]. Besides, the participants were required to draw a picture of their self-image when speaking English. It is believed that such kind of visual data can enrich and complement written narrations, and motivate younger participants [15]. Afterwards, the participants also finished a background questionnaire to get an initiatory understanding of the possible sources of the participants' identity construction. Notably, not only English learning experiences but also upbringing background were included in the questionnaire since identities were believed to be both constructed and inherited [3].

In the second stage, six participants (see Table 1) were selected to take part in semi-structured narrative interviews to get a more in-depth understanding of the influential factors of Chinese Junior High School EFL learners' identity constructions. To make the participants more at ease, the interviews were carried out in pairs using Chinese [2]. The interviews mainly focused on participants' experiences of English learning, their personal feelings toward English, the advantages of learning English and so on [2]. Also, any unexpected aspects related to the researched topic arising in the interview process were inquired more in detail, since co-construction between participants and researcher is believed to play a vital role in narrative inquiries [13]. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed and translated by the researcher.

**Table 1.** Narrative Interview Participants' Background Information

| Participants                                      | Cindy  | Luna   | Jasmine | Ryan   | William | Jack  |
|---|--------|--------|---------|--------|---------|-------|
| Gender  | Female | Female | Female  | male   | male    | male  |
| Age   | 14     | 14     | 13      | 13     | 14      | 14    |
| Relative English language proficiency among peers | Higher | Medium | Lower   | Higher | Medium  | lower |

Thematic analysis was used when dealing with the data. This traditional data analysis method in qualitative research was approved for analysing data collected from narrative inquiries with a special notice that the time, place and subject of the narrations should also be paid certain attention [13]. In the current research, all the narrative data were first carefully coded by the researcher. After that, several themes were identified and re-examined. Also, several excerpts of participants' narration were cited to better illustrate the themes.

### 3. Results

The current study focused on Chinese Junior High school (CJHS) EFL learners' second language identity and explored the influential factors to their identity construction, using a series of narrative inquiries. The main findings are presented as follows.

#### 3.1. Identity constructions

Consisting with most previous studies, the identities of Chinese junior high school EFL learners also flux as their learning process moves on. More specifically, the majority of them experienced a downtrend in their confidence as both EFL learners and English speakers as they moved into higher grades. In the narrative frame tasks, many students described their early English learning experience in primary school as *"a piece of cake"* *"a subject which I can easily get a full mark"* and *"game-like"*. By contrast, when describing their higher grades in English learning, some students came up with negative metaphors like *"climbing a mountain with a heavy backpack"* *"sailing on the sea without navigation"* *"reading a sealed book"* *"listening to a monk chanting sutra"*. A participant's narrative

story outside school further illustrated junior high school EFL learners' decreased confidence in speaking English.

*"When I was in Grade One or Grade Two, I once met a foreigner on the street. I kept saying 'hello' and 'how are you' to him. Though my mother was so embarrassed, I still repeated these only sentences I knew to the foreigner excitedly and loudly... Now, I will definitely never do that again, even if I know more English after six years of learning. I dare not. That's so embarrassing."* (Luna)

More interestingly, several more subtle disparities were identified in terms of their emotional response to English and English learning, and their self-recognition as English speakers. Firstly, even though most of them agreed English is a valuable and important language, they also perceived English as distant and reach-less at the same time. A certain number of students described nearby English speakers, for example, English teachers, and classmates who are good at English, as "*knowledgeable*", "*advanced*", and "*competent*", suggesting their positive attitude toward English and the English language. Jasmine's narration further explained their recognition of the value of English.

*"I know English can bring me to a bigger world. It will make travelling easier ... If my English is good, I will get more opportunities in the future, like studying abroad and finding a better job."* (Jasmine).

However, other students used more moderate words to describe English speakers, for example, "*a deity*" and "*an alien from a higher civilization*". These imaginative metaphors implied that English speakers are more or less unapproachable to some junior high school EFL learners, and they found them a little bit challenging to communicate with.

In accordance with their value of English, CJHS EFL learners have a strong desire to become fluent English speakers in the future regardless of their current English proficiency. Ryan gave a very vivid and detailed narration of his imaginary circumstance of speaking native-like English in the future.

*"When I watch news on TV, I dream of taking part in the UN someday in the future. I will give a speech to the world and answer journalists' questions in English confidently. Millions of people will listen to me. Everyone will adore me and think that I am extraordinary because my English is so fluent and my pronunciation is so good."* (Ryan).

Even a participant who seemed to struggle a lot in English classes also had a positive imaginary identity, though it is comparatively vaguer.

*"Of course, you can't help imagining yourselves speaking English perfectly. I do so because I am well aware that there must be some cases when I have to use English in the future when I get a job."* (Jack).

However, when they were drawn back to reality most of them revealed a low self-recognition as English speakers. Most of them attribute this to their lack of English proficiency and opportunities to speak.

*"I will never voluntarily speak English. My English is not good enough to string together a sentence. Others can't understand my 'loose-packed English', and I will also suffer when trying to make myself understood. That's really awkward."* (William).

Surprisingly, all the participants are indeed using English in their daily conversation in a code-switching way. In the narrative interview section, they all mentioned their frequent casual use of certain English words or phrases to "*express meaning more precisely*". The code-switching English use can be commonly seen when conversation topics are related to pop stars and fan culture, basketball, and video games, as well as when they try to express direct strong feelings.

*"When we talk about our favourite pop-stars, we will always use the English word 'idol' rather than the Chinese words... When we praise our friends, sometimes we will also use English like 'you're so cute' or 'you're so clever'. I don't know why, but it seems that English is easier to say in such conditions. Using Chinese will be a little weird."* (Cindy).

*“But sometimes we use English on purpose to satirize others.” (Luna).*

Boys also narrated similar situations,

*“When we talk about Honor of Kings (a mobile game), we would say ‘first blood’ ‘double kill’ ‘an enemy has been slaved’ and so on naturally. Perhaps that’s because the dub in the game was in English.” (Jack).*

### **3.2. Influential factors**

Through narrative inquiry, several factors that may influence Chinese Junior High School EFL learners’ second language identity were also identified. The main factors include social context in China, direct connection between English and daily life, attitude and performance of other people and experience in English classes.

#### **3.2.1. Social Context in China.**

In the narrative interview, all six participants spontaneously located themselves in the broader social context of China.

*“Everywhere needs English, and nowadays everyone has to learn some English. Otherwise, you will be eliminated by the society... There is no need for someone else to tell me this. I am well aware of that myself.” (Jack).*

Apparently, the wide social recognition of English, opinions on social media and relevant policies invisibly strengthened junior high school EFL learners’ self-awareness of becoming an English speaker. Meanwhile, the widely acknowledged importance of English has more or less changed the EFL educational ecology in China, exposing children to English at a much earlier age and more frequently than imagined. This, in turn, also positively contributes to their second language identity in general.

*“My first exposure to English was in kindergarten. I remembered we had a male teacher from, I don’t know, maybe America. I was attracted because he looked so different. He brought toys, pictures, and candies to class. He taught us letters and words, and led us to play games... Since then I have been interested in English.” (Luna).*

With a forward-looking mother, Cindy was first exposed to English even earlier,

*“My mother would play English children’s songs and cartoons to me and my sister. She said, just listen to them will do good to you.” (Cindy)*

#### **3.2.2. Experience in English classes.**

When being asked to reflect on experiences related to English, English classes were the first situation the participants would come up with. Perhaps that is because English classes were one of the most important and frequent settings where participants were exposed to English in an EFL context like China. Coming along the classroom setting were related subjects including teachers, peers, learning contents and quizzes.

*“In the beginning, I was interested in English. Because English classes were always full of fun at that time, and I got good grades. In Grade 5 and Grade 6, I began to dislike English. We got a new teacher. Her classes were boring and she was very strict. I once quarrelled with her... But in Junior High School, I started to like English again. I think our English teacher’s voice is delightful and she speaks English really well...” (Jasmine).*

However, as can be noticed from Jasmine’s story, though classroom experiences seem to be impressive, their influence is usually short-term and easy to modify.

### 3.2.3. The direct connection between English and daily life.

Participants perceive English-related hobbies to be another considerable source in building up their second language identity. They believed it was these leisure activities that really brought English into part of their life, and further to a part of themselves.

*“My sister is a great fan of Taylor Swift, so I also started to listen to her songs. Gradually, I also fall in love with English songs. More than half of the songs in my list are English ones, I listen to them every day, when I am on the bus, taking a shower or even doing my homework. I would also learn to sing these songs. I once had a dream at night. In the dream, I sing Taylor Swift’s Love Story perfectly.” (Cindy).*

Boys also talked about English as a daily pleasure, though the topic was different from girls. Their interest lies in video games.

*“I happened to know a game called NBA 2K21. I searched on the Internet and finally installed it on my computer. But everything in it was in English. I wanted to play it so much, so I looked up every word in it. Now I can understand the English instructions in it, and I really enjoy playing it.” (Jack).*

Luna explicitly pointed out the importance of connecting English to her current life in a more direct way.

*“English is still too far away. Getting a job won’t happen until I finish my university study. My parents never take me travel abroad. I don’t have a foreign friend to communicate with, either... If I have a clear, almost settled plan of going abroad to study in a year, I will know for sure that I need to use the language for study and for daily communication. Then every effort I make in English becomes meaningful and I will be more motivated.” (Luna).*

### 3.2.4. The influence of people around.

People around is another factor that influences Chinese junior high school EFL learners’ identity flux. However, a certain amount of daily interaction and intimacy is indeed necessary for the influence to happen.

*“My father always goes abroad on business. After several business trips to other countries, he got promoted and our family’s life also got better. From him, I know English is important and helpful. My father is an example.” (Ryan).*

By contrast, William told his story with a different attitude.

*“I have a cousin who is now in university. It is said that his English is good. So, one weekend, my mother asked me to go hiking with him, and by the way, I learned how to learn English well. That’s ridiculous! I don’t even know him!” (William).*

More interestingly, the influential one doesn’t have to be an older one or a proficient English speaker.

*“My younger sister is only in Grade three, and her English is quite good for her age. Sometimes this motivates me, to put more effort into English.” (Jasmine).*

Moreover, the influence from nearby people may not always happen in a positive way. Jack told about his story of having a fake identity due to a special kind of peer pressure.

*“Most of my friends are poor at English. Sometimes I actually want to learn English harder. I know I should do so. But if they noticed, they would laugh at me. So instead of trying to improve my English, I choose to play basketball with them. I pretend that I don’t care about English at all. Maybe they are also pretending they don’t care. I don’t know. Maybe just trying to be cool.” (Jack).*

## 4. Discussion

Drawing upon narrative data collected from several CJHS EFL learners, this study explored their second language identities and the possible sources of their second language identity constructions.

Echoing many other previous studies, CJHS EFL learners' second language identities also fluxed, even though their English learning experience is comparatively short. Similar to Teng's study with Chinese university EFL learners, junior high school learners' identities also subsided when learning challenges increased and more pressure was taken in [2]. There is almost no doubt that many other factors were indeed working together to result in the identity change, which will be discussed in detail later. The identity change of the participants in this study added more evidence to the complex and dynamic nature of identity, suggesting that this nature also works for younger EFL learners [2-3, 5, 10-11].

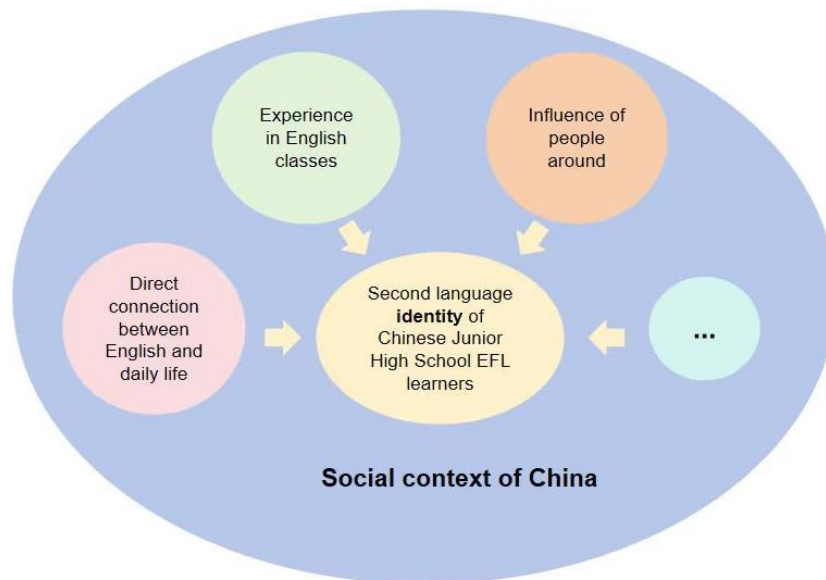
Meanwhile, the disparities that have been found in terms of Chinese junior high school EFL learners' second language identities in the study are more interesting and worth noticing. They perceived English as important but distant and perceived themselves as present poor English speakers while having a strong desire to become proficient in English in the future. These kinds of complex, even a little bit conflicting identity construction might be attributed to the general social context in China. Having been included as a compulsory course in both basic and higher education since the dawn of the new millennium, the Ministry of Education of China has further emphasized the importance of English education by restating the teaching aims as cultivating proficient English speakers with international postures [9]. The over two decades of English education development in China has also led to wide social approval of English. One of the best illustrations of this is that English is frequently used as a gatekeeper in the employment market, and those with higher English proficiency is usually paid as mentioned by Jack and Luna in the narrative interviews [9]. The social consensus as discussed above may well explain why EFL learners in Chinese Junior High Schools value English greatly and hope to be proficient English speakers in the future.

At the same time, it has to be recognized that China is a monolingual country and English is seldom used in social interactions. Although some researchers believe that bilingual linguistic landscapes like guide boards and underground signs in most Chinese cities provide language input for EFL learners on a daily basis, the efficiency of such authentic language contexts is doubtful and limited [18]. Recent research has shown that classroom instructions are still the most important scenario where EFL learners learn and are exposed to English [19]. The research also suggested that the majority of in-service EFL teachers in China are non-native English speakers [19]. Even though native English teachers are not perceived as superior to non-native teachers, such distribution may lead to less exposure to English for non-native teachers who may use Chinese for instructions, especially for less proficient EFL learners like junior high school students. Moreover, it is most commonly agreed that the linguistic distance between English and Chinese is undeniable [20]. On this basis, the distant feeling and lack of confidence of Junior High School EFL learners seem to be reasonable.

A surprising finding is that Junior High School EFL learners use English in a code-switching way in their daily casual conversations. This seemed to be inconsistent with the monolingual context of China. A possible explanation for this might be the influence of globalization and digital technology. With globalization continuously strengthened, being exclusively monolingual becomes almost impossible. More recently, the rapid growth of digital technology has intensified this trend [3]. As argued by Lam, digital social networks have provided foreign language learning a new exposure space, which has got rid of traditional interaction ways [21]. As a younger generation growing up with all kinds of digital devices, Junior High School EFL learners interact with English in various ways online by listening to music, watching video clips, playing games and so on [3]. Perhaps online interactions mean more to younger EFL learners than is being perceived, and are more powerful in constructing their second language identity than imagined.

When investigating deeper into the sources of Junior High School EFL learners' second language identity constructions, several interesting topics popped out. Firstly, it is noticed that social context plays a vital though impalpable role in CJHS EFL learners' identity construction process. As has been addressed above, English has been socially recognized as an important foreign language [9]. Indeed, the importance of English is so widely agreed in China that its influence has gone beyond the educational and professional field but immersed almost every aspect of social life into it, including

self-recognition and parenting style. As Jack and Luna narrated, as young as Junior High School EFL learners are, they are clearly aware of the importance of the English language, and their parents tried to bring English into their daily lives. In this case, social context is not only shaping learners' second language identity, but also imperceptibly affecting many other seemingly unrelated aspects to EFL learning, which in turn, also contribute to CJHS EFL learners' second language identities in an implicit way (see Figure 1). This finding further supported Norton's dynamic view on language identity, suggesting reconsidering second language identities in relation to broader contexts [3, 5].



**Figure 1.** Influencing Factors on Chinese Junior High School EFL Learners' Second Language Identities (Picture Credit: Original)

Secondly, unlike more mature EFL learners like adults and university students, junior high school EFL learners' second language identity construction can be attributed to more down-to-earth factors. Compared with the long-term benefits of learning a second language, they put more attention on current issues like after-class hobbies, present classroom experiences, and feedback from intimate nearby people. This echoed with Lave and Wenger's early exemplary work which stressed the irreplaceable role of micro-context in analyzing language identities and further inspired people to value both broader social context and participant-specific context equally when doing identity research [22].

From a more pedagogical perspective, it is delightful to find an identity-oriented pedagogy could be helpful in supporting EFL learners positively construct their second language identity since the role of the language classroom has clearly been approved by the participants of the current research [8, 16]. However, the specific ways to give interventions in language classrooms might need reconsideration when targeting learners of different ages and with different backgrounds. It seemed that for Chinese Junior High School EFL learners, personal reflections could be more helpful than providing cognitive and social benefits of learning English, for it is the former that could make them find some direct sensible connections between English and themselves [8].

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the narrative data collected through written tasks and interviews, the current research explored the second language identity constructions of Chinese Junior High School EFL learners and their sources. It has been found that Chinese Junior High School EFL learners' second language identity experienced a downtrend flux as their English learning moved on. Also, several disparities were noticed in their second language identity constructions. EFL learners in Chinese Junior High schools perceived English as important but distant and perceived themselves as present poor English

speakers while having a strong desire to become proficient in English in the future. These interesting disparities were partly attributed to the uniqueness of English learning contexts in China.

In line with many other previous studies, the second language identities of Chinese Junior High School EFL learners were also complex and dynamic in nature, being constantly influenced by various factors. The social context was found to play a vital though impalpable role in Junior High School EFL learners' second language identity construction process. It may not only shape Junior High School EFL learners' identity but also affect other factors, which may contribute to CJHS second language identities in the end. Experience in English classes, a direct connection between English and daily life and the influence of people around were also identified as influencing factors to CJHS second language identities. Based on these findings, several implications were proposed to improve EFL teaching in junior high schools in China and to help younger EFL learners in China better negotiate their language identities.

For stakeholders including policymakers and curriculum designers, an identity-oriented perspective should also be taken in making decisions relating to both general and more specific EFL learning contexts. Noticeably, digital spaces like the internet and other social media should be paid more attention to since they seem to be quite contributing to CJHS EFL learners' second language identities. Moreover, it would also be beneficial to form a tracing system of CJHS EFL learners' second language identity. This would not only help both researchers and stakeholders better understand the language identity constructions of younger EFL learners but also help improve EFL teaching in return since the analysis of identity could also provide valuable insights into learners' needs and motivation.

For Chinese in-service EFL teachers, the findings of the current research further supported Rutger and her partners' work in the British context, suggesting the necessity of combining an identity-based pedagogy into EFL classes. However, the current findings also inspired people that the implementation of such pedagogy might need certain modifications according to Chinese EFL learning contexts and the specific needs of CJHS EFL learners. EFL teachers in Chinese Junior High Schools should pay more attention to helping EFL learners find a connection between English and their daily lives. Perhaps one of the easy and effective ways to attain this is to use digital technologies in class to present English songs, movies and so on. Besides, regular self-reflection on the relationships between English and EFL learners themselves as suggested by Forbes and so on could also be beneficial as it can help CJHS EFL learners reflect in an explicit way, and thus construct their second language identity in a positive way. Last but not least, it would also be helpful if more power could be transferred to EFL learners in class, endowing them with more opportunities to use and speak English. Hopefully, the actions taken by teachers in class could help reduce the distant feeling CJHS EFL learners' have about English. After all, in an EFL context like China, EFL classes are still at least one of the most important settings where learners are exposed to English.

Inevitably, there are certain limitations in the current research. First, only a small number of participants took part in the research, and all of them were from the same school. Although their family background varies, it is hard to generate the current findings for larger populations, especially to Chinese Junior School EFL learners from less developed areas in China, including Western China and rural areas. Second, all the data in the study were collected within a short period of time, making the long-term immediacy change of learners' second language identities less likely to be observed. Also, the researcher of the research was teaching the participants English at the same time. This may possibly help build a more trustful researcher-participant relationship, while on the other hand, may also lead to some disguises and biases. Thus, to gain a better insight into second language identities, future larger scale studies with more participants from various backgrounds and longitudinal studies would both be helpful.

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