

Expositions

Class in English Language Teaching and Learning Research

David Block

Universitat Pompeu Fabra

Class has always been a key mediating factor for access to and performance in education, even if the attention it has received has varied: In some cases, it has been minimal, and in other cases, the construct has suffered a kind of erasure (i.e., it has disappeared from the lexicon of researchers). The trend toward the latter has been particularly pronounced in research in language education, and in particular, English teaching and learning. This chapter argues that class is a useful construct in such research. It is divided into 2 parts of unequal length. The first part presents and discusses thinking about class and the author's current understanding of it. The second part is a speculative discussion of a possible new direction for future research on English-language teaching and learning which incorporates class as a key construct.

階級は常に教育へのアクセスと成績の重要な仲介要因として機能してきました。ただし、それに対する注目度は場合によって異なります:一部の状況では最小限に留まり、他の状況ではこの概念が研究者の用語から消え去るような「消去」という現象が見られました(つまり、研究者の用語から消えてしまいました)。後者の傾向は言語教育の研究、特に英語の教授と学習に関する研究において特に顕著です。この論文では、階級がこのような研究において有用な概念であるとの主張を展開します。論文は不均衡な長さの2つのパートに分かれています。第1部では、階級に関する著者の現在の理解を提示し議論します。第2部は、階級を主要な概念として組み込んだ英語教育と学習の将来の研究における新たな方向性に関する推論的な議論です。

Keywords: class; English language teaching and learning; Marxist thought; political economy

<https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTJJ47.2-2>

JALT Journal, Vol. 47, No. 2, November 2025

Writing five decades ago about how one of the key functions of an education in capitalist society is to prepare students for the class positions that they will eventually occupy, Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued that “schooling fosters and rewards the development of certain capacities and the expression of certain needs, while thwarting and penalising others” (p. 129). In this way, an education system “tailors the self-concepts, aspirations, and social class identifications of individuals to requirements of the social division of labor” (ibid). Stating matters in this way, Bowles and Gintis were, in effect, reproducing the ideas of other noted anti-capitalists from the distant and not so distant past. I am thinking here of Marx (1990), who explained how the denial of education to child factory workers in mid-nineteenth century England was a way for the capitalist class to keep the proletariat in its place, and Gramsci (1971), who wrote about the great division in Italian education in the early twentieth century between “the vocational school for the instrumentalist [working] classes [and] the classical school for the dominant classes and the intellectuals” (p. 26). Indeed, whether it be via denial or segregation, this kind of division in education is vital to the ongoing reproduction of class relations in capitalist societies, and it has been the focus of multiple publications of varied stripes over the years.

For example, in the late 1950s, Michael Young (1958) published an influential novel about a future British society dominated by the notion of meritocracy, in which those who are naturally able and who, in addition, apply themselves to academic study, come to rule society as members of the educated elite class. In a similar vein, Pierre Bourdieu cast an anthropological gaze on French society and the class privilege of the educated elites in possession of *distinction* in the 1960s and 70s (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). A decade later, in the United States, there was a good number of notable ethnographic and ethnographically-oriented studies of class in education. Two well-known and oft-cited examples are Shirley Brice Heath’s (1983) detailed examination of the literacy practices of white and black working-class families in a mill town in a southern state in the 1970s and Penny Eckert’s (1989) analysis of class-inflected linguistic variation and change in a Michigan high school in the 1980s. Moving into the 1990s and 2000s, Michelle Lareau and Lois Weiss examined the class divide in education in the United States from two different class perspectives. Lareau (2011) focussed on the growing trend among upper middle-class American parents to devote a great deal of time and effort to what she termed the ‘concerted cultivation’ of their children. Concerted

cultivation implies the extremely hands-on and enhanced monitoring of children's development by parents, which includes, among other things, enrolment in multiple extracurricular activities and attempts to form them as 'critical' thinkers and communicators (Lareau, 2011). Meanwhile, Weis (1990) followed a cohort of working-class young people, first in their high school days in the 1980s and then some years later, as they tried to survive in a hostile job market dominated by global capitalism (Weis, 2005). In the 2010s, scholars in countries such as China (Sheng, 2014), Japan (Kiriya, 2013), and India (LaDousa, 2014) continued in a similar vein, dissecting the very different iterations of class divisions in education in their respective countries. More recently, Daniel Markovits (2019) offers a well-documented critique of the merit myth and persistent inequality in American society, while Sharon Jones (2023) examines class reproduction in British education, basing her analysis on the accounts of participants.

One outstanding characteristic of these publications is the fact that the authors have situated class front and centre in their research. As I have suggested elsewhere (Block, 2014; 2015), this inclusion and even prioritising of class as a key construct is not especially common in educational research. This is the case even less so in research focusing on English language teaching and learning (hereafter ELTL), the main interest of the readers of *JALT Journal*. My starting point in this paper is that class is of crucial importance in any understanding of a range of events and phenomena in society today, as we make our way through the third decade of the digital age. This premise leads me to begin my discussion with a general, though selective discussion of class as conceptualised by scholars, from Marx to Bourdieu. This discussion is followed by the presentation of my own particular view of class. The final part of the paper offers some suggestive comments about how class might be incorporated into research on ELTL.

Class As Understood by Others: A Brief and Partial Discussion

Marx (e.g., 1990 [1867]) is a common starting point for a discussion of class, even if he never actually provided a clear-cut definition of it in his work (Block, 2014). Nevertheless, one can glean what he meant by class from his discussions of the relationship between individuals and collectives and the means of production in England and other industrialising European countries in the 19th century, and how from these relations there arose very different class-based ways of life and class-based consciousnesses. Scholars writing about class after Marx, from the 1880s onwards,

bore witness to the increasing complexification of societies, with Emile Durkheim (1984 [1893]) first, and later Max Weber (1968 [1922]), being the sociologists who most thoroughly reconfigured understandings of class in the light of changes taking place. Weber's work is of particular interest as he introduced the notions of 'status' and 'status situation' as a way of making sense of inequality and stratification in industrialized societies. This inequality and stratification existed not only in terms of material conditions (economics), but also in terms of more abstract, socially constructed cultural phenomena. The latter include practices and activities such as the consumption of particular goods and engagement in particular pastimes--the display and flaunting of wealth identified by Thorsten Veblen (2007 [1899])--all of which is related to differentiable lifestyles which are valued unequally in societies in terms of what Weber (1968) called 'prestige' and what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) later called 'distinction'.

Surveying different views on class three decades ago, Ellen Meiksins Wood (2016 [1995]) suggested that there are two broad, differentiable ways of framing the construct. There is class as a 'structural *location*' and class as a 'social *relation*'. In the former approach, class is a 'form of stratification', effectively "a layer in a more hierarchical structure, differentiated according to 'economic' criteria such as income, 'market chances' or occupation" (p. 76). In class as a 'social *relation*', class appears as 'a socio-historical' phenomenon, that is, as "a relation between appropriators and producers, determined by the specific form in which, to use Marx's phrase, 'surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers'" (ibid). This is a view of class perhaps best exemplified by E.P. Thompson (1980 [1963]), who was not overly interested in categorising people by their location in hierarchical structures, including their income vis-à-vis that of others. Instead, Thompson focused on how people live and make history as emergent subjects in the social circumstances of their day-to-day existence. He thus was interested in the two key notions in Marxist thinking: 'class in itself' (i.e., class as the objective reality of interests shared with others living within the same set of life circumstances), and 'class for itself' (i.e., not only an awareness of the aforementioned objective reality but also the actions taken with others in the pursuance of improved life conditions). As Thompson (1980) explained:

[C]lass happens when [people], as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other [people] whose interests are different from (and generally op-

posed to) theirs [...] Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms; embodied in traditions, value systems, ideas, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class consciousness does not. (pp. 8–9)

In this understanding of class there is first and foremost *class struggle*, as the inevitable clash of interests between capitalists and proletarians, which provides the lived experiences and makes it possible for class to happen (class in itself) and *class warfare*, as class struggle in terms of the economic policies put into practice by the dominant capitalist class that constitute a very real and tangible attack on the material and existential well-being of the popular classes. As I explain elsewhere (Block, 2018), we see class warfare very clearly in the transfer of wealth that occurred as the Great Recession began in 2007–2008: in countries around the world, it was the less wealthy and poor who suffered massive home repossession (due to owners' inability to pay their mortgages), which meant not only the loss of their home but also all of the money which had been paid on the mortgage up to that point in time. Meanwhile, in education, there was, at the time the crisis hit, a greater willingness among analysts to frame discussions of education at all levels as class warfare (Benn, 2011; Weis, 2014), in line with the earlier work of the aforementioned Bowles and Gintis (1976). Ultimately, in the realm of home ownership, in the realm of education and, indeed, in the realm of any domain of activity that people engage in, it is from the individual and collective experience of class struggle and class warfare that class consciousness emerges as class for itself, which then mediates further collective class-based activity.

A further element in Thompson's thinking is the relational nature of class, which occurs in two key ways. First, there is how a collective known as 'working class' exists in a dialectal relation to an antagonistic collective known as the 'capitalist class' (or what we may simply understand to be the 'entrepreneurial class'). In effect, all social events contributing to the making of the working class are contingent on the activities of the capitalist class. And, of course, *vice versa*: for the capitalist class to exist, there must be a working class to dominate and exploit, extracting from its members' surplus labour. The second way that class is relational can be seen in the experiences lived by individuals with fellow class members. One cannot exist as a working-class person without the existence of others in the same class condition and the experiences shared with them. Bearing all of this in mind, we may see the relationality of class as a structural/structuring

imperative---the realities of capitalism pitting groups in opposition to one another---and as a social process, which includes all the life experiences shared by working class people in their ongoing interactions with one another, both within the realm of production and beyond, in what might properly be understood as the social, political and cultural spheres of human activity.

In the midst of such thinking about class, Bourdieu (e.g., 1984) emerges as an interesting figure in the history of class-based scholarship. On the one hand, like Marx, he saw class inequality as a matter of material states and processes (see his 'economic capital' and Wood's class as 'structural location'). However more important in his work is his allegiance to notions found in the work of Weber and Thompson, as he framed class as emergent in the practices and cultural activity of individuals in fields, or domains of social activity (see his 'cultural capital', as legitimized knowledge and know-how, and 'social capital', as social relations facilitating paths to success in individual life trajectories). Over the past several decades, there has been a tendency in the social sciences and humanities---including applied linguistics---to conceptualise and discuss class in a broadly Bourdieusian manner. This has meant a somewhat unquestioning acceptance of and even embrace of Bourdieu's eclectic view of class incorporating, to a small degree, a Marxist perspective, and to a large degree, a Weberian perspective.

Notwithstanding this affinity to Bourdieu's views in most social sciences and humanities publications incorporating class as a construct, there has been some push-back, mainly by Marxist scholars. For example, Alex Callinicos (1999) criticised Bourdieu for his use of capital as a resource possessed by human beings: the famous capital metaphors---economic, social and cultural---mentioned previously. For Callinicos, this metaphorical use of capital is more indicative of a limited grasp of political economy than cutting edge social analysis. In a similar vein, David Harvey (2014) expressed his profound objections to Bourdieu's characterisation of personal endowments "as a form of capital" (p. 186), arguing that while "capital undoubtedly uses [...] signs of distinction in its sales practices and pitches [...] that does not mean that distinction is a form of capital" (ibid: 187). For Harvey, distinction is about the symbolic orders emerging from and intertwined with the ongoing development of capitalism and the economic inequalities which come with this development. It therefore does not need the label 'capital', even if it is obviously part and parcel of the sociocultural construction of class and inequality in contemporary

societies. Ultimately, a Marxist critique of Bourdieu reveals what Marnie Holborow (2015) describes as his “intention [...] to reassert the force of the cultural and symbolic, including language, over and beyond the economic” (p. 59). Nevertheless, despite these and other reservations about aspects of Bourdieu’s work, his view of class, as I noted earlier, has become central to any discussion of the phenomenon, and in my own work on this topic over the years, I have taken some of his ideas on board, albeit in my own particular way. It is to my view of class that I turn to in the next section.

Class As I Understand It

Over the past twenty years, I have gradually developed a way of framing class for my own research purposes. I have, first and foremost, drawn on the foundational work of Marx. I have then incorporated ideas gleaned from my reading of Weber, and then later, drawn on the contributions of Thompson, Wood, Bourdieu, and many other scholars and their different approaches. I have also been influenced by broad surveys conducted over the past 25 years, as outlined in detail in publications such as Bennett et al. (2009) and Huguée et al. (2020). The latter publication presents the results of an ambitious project examining class in 26 EU member states, using the ‘European Socio-Economic Groups’ (ESEG) classification scheme (INSEE, 2016). The ESEG has seven general groups divided into thirty subgroups, which Huguée et al. convert to three broad class categories—‘dominant’, ‘middle’, and ‘working’. Although there are considerable problems with questionnaire-based models of class, not least their relatively static view of social realities (see the discussion of class as ‘social location’ above), these models do nonetheless have the advantage of providing a clear benchmark for differentiating people in terms of their relative and respective class positions. With this redeeming feature in mind, I reproduce in Table 1 below a working list of class positions. I have added a fourth class category, the ‘outer class’, in order to include those who are (1) employed outside of the formal, *official* economy; (2) semi-employed or precariously-employed (off and on) in low-paid, low-status work; and (3) long-term unemployed. This addition is important because in much research, class is linked mainly to type of employment, thus excluding those who in the past have been called ‘the underclass’ (Wilson, 1987), ‘the outcasts’ (Wacquant, 2008), or even just ‘the poor’ (Gans, 1995).

Table 1*A 4 Class/10 Group Model (Based on Huguée et al., 2020)*

Class	Employment Sectors
Dominant class	
1) The '1 %'	magnates & wealthy entrepreneurs (media, industrial, retail); chief executive officers; successful entertainers; national & global politicians/policy makers
2) Managerial & entrepreneurial	senior managers; medium-level entrepreneurs
3) Professionals	science, engineering, information, & communications technology (ICT); academic & research; health & medical (doctors); business & administration; legal & judicial, social & cultural
Middle class	
4) Technicians & associated professionals	retail & hospitality management (hotels, restaurants, bars); health & medical (e.g. nurses); business & administration (e.g. accountants); legal, social & cultural
5) Small entrepreneurs	retail & hospitality (hotels, restaurants, bars); farmers; small company owners (including technology-based start-ups)
6) Clerks & skilled service employees	Law enforcement; administrative support in multitude of sectors; customer services; personal care; armed forces & protective services
Working class	
7) Industrial skilled employees	Building & related trade; food processing, wood working, garment trade; metal, machinery, printing, electrical & electronics; stationary plant & machine operators; assemblers; drivers
8) Less skilled employees	Personal services & sales; food preparation; cleaning; agriculture

Class	Employment Sectors
Outer class	
9) Extra-official, semi employed, low-paid	Collecting (e.g. garments, sheet metal, furniture); off-the-books delivery; off-the-books in sectors 7 & 8
Unemployed	Out of work, probably on government subsidy

As for the kind of criteria one might use to situate individuals in this class scheme, that is, the multiple dimensions that index class in different ways in different contexts, cultures, and societies, I have tended to use qualitative categories as opposed to statistical ones. The result is what I call a *constellation of interrelated dimensions* model (Block, 2014), which consists of five general categories subdivided into specific social relations as follows:

Economic resources

- Property: land and housing
- Property: other material possessions, such as electronic goods, clothing, books, art, etc.
- Income: salary and wages
- Accumulated wealth: savings and investments

Sociocultural resources

- Occupation: manual labour, unskilled service jobs, low-level information-based jobs, professional labour, etc.
- Education: level of formal education attained and the corresponding cultural capital acquired
- Technological know-how: familiarity and ability to use evolving technologies
- Social contacts and networking: people regularly associated with as friends and acquaintances in class terms (the extent to which middle-class people tend to socialize with middle-class people, working-class people with working-class people, and so on)
- Societal and community status and prestige: embodied, achieved, and ascribed

Behaviour

- Symbolic behaviour (e.g., how one moves one's body, the clothes one wears, the way one speaks, how one eats)
- Consumption patterns: choice of shops, buying brands or not, ecological/organic consumption, etc.
- Pastimes: golf, skiing, cockfighting, online for participation

Life conditions

- Political life: one's relative position in hierarchies of power in society
- Quality of life: in terms of physical and psychological comfort and health
- Type of neighbourhood: a working-class neighbourhood, a middle-class neighbourhood, an area in the process of gentrification
- Spatial conditions: how much space one has to live in
- Mobility: physical movement, from highly local to global
- Proximity to other people during a range of day-to-day activities
- Dimensions and size of space occupied: layout of dwelling or place of work, size of bedroom; size of office, etc.
- Type of dwelling: trailer, house (detached/semidetached), flat (studio, small, large), etc.

The understanding of class that I present here is not without its problems, and 'handle with care' seems to be a good caveat to insert at this point. I say this not least because the model itself is under a constant state of revision (compare this version to an early one in Block, 2012), as my ongoing reading about class in different contexts across time leads me to add, delete, and reorder the various dimensions listed under the five headings (and the five headings are, of course, subject to revision as well). In addition, there is a degree of conceptual and categorical slippage in the conflation of more material aspects with more cultural, status-oriented ones, and the relative acceptability of combining what in effect are Marxist and Weberian perspectives. This issue of Marx/Weber commensurability vs. incommensurability has been the subject of a great deal of debate for some time (e.g., Giddens, 1973; Wright, 2015), although space does not allow a thorough treatment here (see Block, 2014 for a discussion). All of this reminds us of the complexity of class as something of a moving object

which evolves as societies themselves evolve, and that we perhaps need to accept a degree of conceptual messiness.

What to Do With All of This

Over the years, I have engaged in many discussions of class, with students, with fellow academics, and with members of what we might call the lay population, that is, people with no connection to the world of academia and formal study. Across these different groups, I have found that no two interlocutors come to the topic in exactly the same way. Still, I have noted three dominant trends in comments that have been made to me. First, there is the claim that Marx is ‘so nineteenth century’, ‘so white’, ‘so male’ and ‘so western’ and for all of this, irrelevant in any discussion of contemporary society. Second, there is the claim, advanced from the beginning of the neoliberal era by scholars such as André Gorz (1982), that the political economy of societies worldwide has evolved to the point that we cannot, with any authority, talk about class. Third and finally, there is the claim that key dimensions of identity (see Block, 2022), in particular race and gender, are simply more important than class or that they are *the* fundamental, deeper-level, real structuring mechanisms in society.

Regarding the first claim, it is my belief that we can always learn from reading works available to us from the past, be this antiquity and or the past two centuries. I say this because, following Bakhtin (1981[1934-35]), I believe that all words uttered or written in the present “cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads” engendered in the past. When I read contemporary scholars, I see very little that is, strictly speaking, original or unique. Presentism is not a good guide for academic inquiry; recognizing the historical, *heteroglossic* and *intertextual* nature of all texts is.

With regard to the claim that class does not exist today because society has, in effect, moved on, I can cite several present-day phenomena as challenges. First, there are the exploitative conditions under which thousands of millions of people today work in the production of commodities in the so-called emerging economies of the world (from Malaysia to Mexico). In many ways, these contexts are not very different from those described by Friedrich Engels (2009 [1845]) in his compelling account of the condition of the English working class in the mid-nineteenth century. Second, there is the fact that the inherent and fundamental logic of capitalism, and the concomitant class struggle and class warfare that emerge as this logic becomes material reality, do not disappear because the citizens of the wealthy

countries of the world live in a digitised society in which old-school industrial production has, to a great extent, been off-shored. Ultimately, we need to think critically about what occurs in the present to see how the *same old* continues in global capitalism: the drive for profit among those in the entrepreneurial and rentier classes (e.g. the wealth accumulated by big tech founders and property magnates, respectively); the continued slow burn of accumulation by dispossession, whereby the wealthy take from the poor (see my mention of home repossession above); and the ongoing exploitation of workers as political and economic elites collude to prevent legislation guaranteeing a minimum wage sufficient to live on.

The third claim, that class is not as important as different dimensions of identity in shaping our day-to-day and long-term experiences, falls down if we consider that we are not involved here in an exercise in either/or (either identity or class). In my work, I align with what Patricia Hill Collins (2019) has written about intersectionality, and in particular her notion of a *matrix of domination* which is composed not only of systemic -isms related to identity dimensions--racism, sexism, natalism, age-ism, LGBTQ+ phobia and so on--but also the political economy of societies, specifically the oppressive elements constitutive of capitalism (economic exploitation, alienation of workers, class warfare, etc.). I also align with the work of Nancy Fraser over the years (see Fraser, Bua & Vlahos, 2024, for a recent account). Fraser argues for *transformative* political action that would reconfigure ideologies and dominant structuring mechanisms related to identity *and* class, leading to true revolution resulting in a better society characterised, among other things, by equality rather than inequality. Although she has often seemed to separate identity-based *recognition* politics from class-based *redistribution* politics, her intent has always been to unite these causes.

I could go on, but for reasons of space, I will not. Suffice it to say that my position here is: (1) that teachings of scholars past should be taken into account in discussion about society today; (2) that I see class (and class struggle and warfare) in so much that occurs today; and (3) that a focus on class does not mean, *ipso facto*, a lack of focus on identity dimensions such as race and gender. I now move to what my discussion of class thus far means for research on ELTL. How does class as a key aspect of our being in the world exist in any number of activities constituting ELTL at a given point in time?

Class in ELTL: Some Thoughts

Nearly two decades ago Alastair Pennycook (2007) wrote about the promise of English to the millions of actual and potential learners of what is generally considered *the* international language and *the* global *lingua franca* that greases the wheels of global capitalism, while acting as the dominant medium of communication in a range of social domains, from higher education to TikTok videos. Pennycook discusses common myths about English in the following way:

English holds out promise of social and economic development to all those who learn it (rather than a language tied to very particular class positions and possibilities of development) [...] English is a language of equal opportunity (rather than a language which creates barriers as much as it presents possibilities). By contrast with these myths around English, I would point to the collusionary, delusionary and exclusionary effects of English. This thing called English colludes with many of the pernicious processes of globalisation, deludes many learners through the false promises it holds out for social and material gain, and excludes many people by operating as an exclusionary class dialect, favouring particular people, countries, cultures and forms of knowledge. (pp. 100-101)

Here, Pennycook (2007) takes on the notion that English, once learned, acts as the great equaliser and a key mediator of class mobility in an upward direction, as well as the means through which those studying it will become competitive subjects in the global neoliberal order. It is the unquestioning belief in this power of English that undergirds what one finds in so many educational systems around the world, as politicians, administrators and stakeholders alike promote an English-for-all policy which means, in practice, that everyone studies English for several years of primary and secondary school.

Contrary to these raised expectations, what awaits most students of English is a series of hard realities. Among these realities is the likelihood that very few learners of English will ever acquire a 'native' accent and 'native-like proficiency' in terms of grammar and lexis. Instead, they will encounter said accent and proficiency as 'an exclusionary class dialect', in Pennycook's words. In addition, while the acquisition of proficiency in English is sold as a way for people to move from working class and outer

class positions to middle class and even dominant class positions, it is ultimately one's positioning with regard to the dimensions constituting class--economic resources, sociocultural resources, behaviour, quality of life and spatial relations--that will be the primary shaper of how much a learner actually achieves through formal instruction. This is the case in the vast majority of education contexts, and it is interrelated with the ever-broadening gap between the haves and have-nots in countries around the world (Milanovic, 2018). In this way, the English divide may be seen as something of a proxy for broader economic inequality in society.

To make this point we might consider the following profile of an English language learner, aged 14, in Country X:

She is from a poor background, her parents working as fully employed or semi-employed labourers in the low-paid, 'unskilled' services sector.

Her parents have little formal education or technological knowhow, and do not have social contacts or status in society.

Her parents do not own property and do not have many material possessions, such as a computer.

Her parents cannot help their daughter in the acquisition of behaviours valued in society.

She lives in a poor neighbourhood with a high level of criminality, in a small dwelling with poor plumbing and ventilation, and she shares a bedroom with two other siblings.

Life is more a matter of survival than achievement.

This is not the optimal profile for an English language learner, which is not to say that there are not exceptions, that is, examples of people who overcome adversity and experience academic success and upward class mobility in their lifetimes. There surely are. However, my point here is that for young people growing up in the kind of material and social environment just portrayed (and I apologise for the simplicity of my portrayal), the mere study of English in school is not going to lift them and those living in similar conditions out of poverty. For this to happen, there needs to be a transformation of society at large that would eliminate the economic structures currently in place, replacing them with structures that would place economic equality at the forefront of objectives, as opposed to GDP growth, employment and inflation.

In ELTL circles, learners have been framed in different ways as regards *who they are* by researchers with different interests. Mainstream SLA researchers have tended to see them as operators of a language acquisition device, or as information processors, or as the embodiment of a long list of socio-psychological and personality traits (e.g. aptitude, motivation, attitudes, etc.). Meanwhile, language and identity researchers have tended to see learners in terms of key dimensions such as race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, age, sexuality and religion. What I propose here is to see learners according to all of these criteria, but to also take into account class as a key mediator of ELTL processes. As for an example of how class-based analysis may be brought into research on ELTL processes, I cite Carly Collins's (2023) explorative study of how class is a key shaping factor in the learning of English outside formal contexts in Barcelona (e.g., in the workplace).

In her research, Collins relied primarily on interview data (both one-on-one and group) to examine and analyse the life stories and language learning experiences of the members of three small cohorts: (1) six people working in relatively low-skill jobs serving others (e.g., restaurant and hotel staff); (2) six people working in the professions (e.g., law, engineering, banking); and (3) eleven first-year business students at a small private university in Barcelona. Among other things, she found that her informants were reluctant to talk about themselves in terms of class, a trend one encounters in many contexts around the world (Block, 2014). She also found that some of her informants who were highly proficient in English subscribed to the view that their success was an outcome of their own individual effort, and not due to their middle-class backgrounds, which would have afforded them more opportunities to learn the language during their years in formal education. However other informants in the study at least acknowledged the relationship between class and level of English, even if they also subscribed to the individualism inherent in the notion that hard work is what makes possible the achievement of a high level of English. Finally, among most of her informants, there was a general alignment with the notion, presented previously, that English is necessary if one wishes to participate in the global economy. English thus had a veneer of prestige or distinction for these informants.

While Collins's study does not cover all of the different dimensions constituting class, much less all of the class positions outlined in Table 1 above, it does provide a snapshot of how class is an integral factor in the lives of young and older adults in Barcelona who use English in their

day-to-day activities. Indeed, in her research, class emerges as a key shaper with regard to the relative proficiency of her informants as well as the ways that English gets used at work and in study. Her study is, in other words, an interesting example of class in ELTL research, along the lines of what I have argued for in this paper.

David Block is Honorary Professor in Sociolinguistics at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Over the past four decades, he has published books and chapters on a variety of topics in applied linguistics and beyond, adopting in recent years a Marxist perspective in his analysis of contemporary social phenomena. His most recent books include *Political Economy and Sociolinguistics* (Bloomsbury, 2018), *Post-truth and Political Discourse* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), *Innovations and Challenges in Identity Research* (Routledge, 2022), and *Interviews in Applied Linguistics: Autobiographical Reflections on Research Processes* (Routledge, 2024). His latest book, *Diagonalism in Online Populist Discourse: Left Moving Right*, will be published by Routledge in 2026.

References

- Bakhtin, M. (1981 [1934-35]). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. University of Texas Press.
- Bennett, T., Savage, M., Silva, E., Warde, A., Gayo-Cal, M., & Wright, D. (2009). *Culture, class, distinction*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203930571>
- Block, D. (2012). Economising globalization and identity in applied linguistics in neoliberal times. In D. Block, J. Gray, & M. Holborow (eds), *Neoliberalism and applied linguistics* (pp. 56-85). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203128121>
- Block, D. (2014). *Social class in applied linguistics*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315871141>
- Block, D. (2015). Social class in applied linguistics. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 35, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190514000221>
- Block, D. (2018). *Political economy and sociolinguistics: Neoliberalism, inequality and social class*. Bloomsbury.
- Block, D. (2022). *Innovations and challenges in identity research*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429356186>
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction*. Routledge.

- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. Sage.
- Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1977). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. Basic Books.
- Callinicos, A. (1999). Social theory put to the test of politics: Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens'. *New Left Review*, 236, 77–102.
- Collins, C. (2023). *Social class, life stories and English learning: Critical realist case studies from Barcelona*. [Doctoral dissertation, Universitat de Lleida]. Tesis Doctorals en Xarxa. <https://www.tdx.cat/bitstream/handle/10803/689678/Tcc1de1.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>
- Collins, P. H. (2019). *Intersectionality as critical social theory*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478007098>
- Eckert, P. (1989). *Jocks and burnouts: Social categories and identity in the high school*. Columbia University Press.
- Engels, F. (1845 [2009]). *The condition of the working class in England*. Oxford Classics.
- Fraser, N., Bua, B., & Vlahos, N. (2024). Democracy, participation, and capitalist crisis. An interview with Nancy Fraser. *Democratic Theory*, 11(1), 116–128. <https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2024.110106>
- Gans, H. (1995). *The war against the poor*. Basic Books.
- Giddens, A. (1973). *The class structure of advanced societies*. Hutchinson.
- Gorz, A. (1982). *Farewell to the working class: An essay on post-industrial socialism*. Pluto Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. Lawrence & Wishart.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511841057>
- Holborow, M. (2015). *Language and neoliberalism*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315718163>
- Hugrée, C., Penissat, E., & Spire, A. (2020). *Social class in Europe: New inequalities in the old world*. Verso.
- Jones, S. (2023). *State schooling and the reproduction of social inequalities: Contesting lived inequalities through participatory methods*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003258216>
- Kiriya, T. (2013). *Education reform and social class in Japan: The emerging incentive divide*. Routledge.

- LaDousa, C. (2014). *Hindi is our ground, English is our sky: Education, language, and social class in contemporary India*. Berghahn Books. <https://doi.org/10.3167/9781782382324>
- Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life* (2nd ed.). University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520949904>
- Markovits, D. (2019). *The meritocracy trap: How America's foundational myth feeds inequality, dismantles the middle class, and devours the elite*. Penguin.
- Marx, K. (1990 [1867]). *Capital: A critique of political economy* (Vol. 1). Penguin.
- Pennycook, A. (2007). *Global Englishes and transcultural flows*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203088807>
- Sheng, X. (2014). *Higher education choice in China: Social stratification, gender and educational inequality*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315814254>
- Wacquant, L. (2008). *Urban outcasts: A comparative sociology of advanced marginality*. Polity Press.
- Weis, L. (1990). *Working class without work: High school students in a de-industrializing economy*. Routledge.
- Weis, L. (2005). *Class reunion: The remaking of the American white working class*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203311578>
- Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. University of Chicago Press.
- Wright, E. O. (2015). *Understanding class*. Verso.
- Young, M. (1958). *The rise of the meritocracy*. Penguin.