"Studying Up": Sociolinguistics Research on Socially Privileged English Language Learners

Stephanie Vandrick
University of San Francisco, USA

Research on social class in sociolinguistics and English language education often focuses on the poor or working class, especially in the context of immigrant students in English dominant countries. Research also sometimes focuses on middle class students. But it seldom addresses the upper class status of a number of language learners. These learners are able to use their class privilege and accompanying resources to access optimal language learning sites and opportunities, often in an English dominant country such as the UK or the USA. Thus they reproduce and increase their privilege and power through mastering English, the language so often used in science, technology, business, and scholarly venues such as this one. Access to this form of social and cultural capital reinforces the rapidly increasing divide between the haves (the oft-discussed "one percent") and the have-nots of the world. Recent scholarship (e.g., Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2012; Chun, 2013; Clarke & Morgan, 2011) on the complicity of neoliberal forces in exacerbating social class inequality and reproducing social class privilege is relevant here. Anthropologist Laura Nader (1972) decried the dearth of research on the upper class and advocated "studying up," i.e., studying "the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty" (p. 289). In that spirit, and in the belief that sociolinguists should try to understand the whole range of language students’ identities, I focus on some of the limited research (e.g., Chun, 2013; Gao, in press; Kanno & Cromley, 2013; Ramanathan & Morgan, 2009; Shin, 2010, in press; Vandrick, 1995, 2010, 2011) on the presence of privileged upper class students in ELT settings, and the implications of that presence for sociolinguistics and for educators, institutions, and educational policy.

Keywords: language education, social class, privilege.