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Exploring the language policy and planning/second language acquisition interface: ecological insights from an Uyghur youth in China

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Abstract Building on recent calls to examine the material realities of people's lives, our paper explores how developments in ecological approaches to second language acquisition (SLA) and recent SLA identity work can help advance the language policy and planning (LPP) research agenda. To this end, we draw on (1) the multi-level transdisciplinary framework for SLA in a multilingual world put forward by the Douglas Fir Group (Mod Lang J 100(S1):19–47, 2016), which examines how language learning and teaching are influenced by micro-, meso-, and macro-level forces, and (2) Darvin and Norton's (Annu Rev Appl Linguist 35:36–56, 2015) model of investment, which looks at the intersection of identity, capital and ideology. By combining these two frameworks, we explain how an ecologically-oriented LPP research agenda can be advanced by taking into consideration key social actors who exist in the complex material realities within which learners are embedded. We anchor our arguments in a case study of a Uyghur youth, Alim, in China whose Putonghua learning trajectory is traced as he moves across several cities over the span of 16 years. Alim's lived experience illustrates how a SLA and LPP interface can be realized in research.

Keywords Language ecology · Identity · Investment · Ethnography · Language policy and planning · Second language acquisition

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Introduction

In the concluding chapter to their co-edited Oxford handbook of language policy and planning (LPP), Pérez-Milans and Tollefson (2018) identify several directions for future LPP research. One area warranting greater attention is in-depth investigation into the material realities of people's lives, which they argue should be characterized by an examination of "why individuals learn and use languages and how they adopt subject positions and identities" (Tollefson and Pérez-Milans 2018: 8). In short, Tollefson and Pérez-Milans appear to be advocating an investigation of the complex ecologies in which individuals are embedded, with a primary focus on of their identities. While we stand in agreement with this stance, Tollefson and Pérez-Milans stop short of underscoring the role of second language acquisition (SLA) in advancing the LPP research agenda. In particular, we contend that SLA identity research can inform and enhance LPP research.

It is this interface between LPP and SLA that constitutes the primary focus of our paper. Admittedly, we are not the first to point that overlaps between these two strands of applied linguistics exist. Spolsky (1989) posits that SLA and LPP are closely linked. Cooper (1989) expands the scope of language planning to include acquisition planning and observes that "[l]anguage planning refers to deliberate efforts to influence the behavior of others with respect to the acquisition … of their language codes" (p. 45). Focusing on L2 literacy development, Hornberger's (1994) integrative framework on language planning also includes acquisition planning, which appears alongside status and corpus planning, a point that is also emphasized in Lo Bianco (2010). More recently, in June 2015, a Bridging Language Acquisition and Language Policy Symposium was convened at Lund University, Sweden (http://konferens.ht.lu.se/lpp-symposium/), suggests that an exploration of how to bridge LPP and SLA is much needed (see also Maarja et al. 2018).

In light on an explicit attempt to bring these two key research strands together for their potential synergies, our paper begins with an analysis of ecologically-oriented SLA and LPP research to show parallel developments between these two fields of work. Building on this broader theoretical framework, we argue that developments in SLA identity work, which focus on "the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2013: 4), can aid us in realizing Pérez-Milans and Tollefson's (2018) and Pennycook's (2016) vision of a LPP field that takes into consideration the materiality of people's lives. To illustrate how recent SLA research can help us achieve such a vision, we draw on a case study of a Uyghur university student. In particular, we investigate how his acquisition of Putonghua in China was influenced by a combination of ecological forces and his identity-driven investment in learning the language.

Ecological SLA

In this section, and in line with the broader social turn in SLA (Block 2003), we review how SLA over the past two decades has been shaped by an ecological approach, whose continuing appeal and influence is instantiated in the recent launch of a new journal, titled *Language Ecology*. In his 1995 book, van Lier put forward

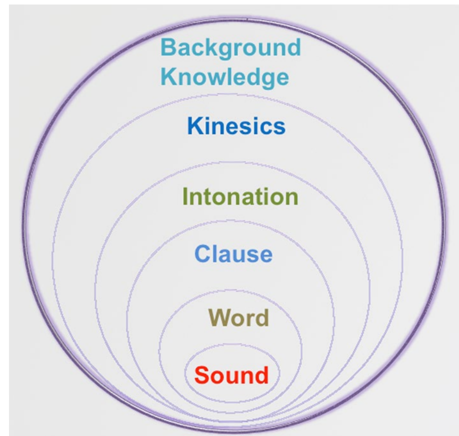

Figure 1 Layers of meaning, levels of interpretation. (Reproduced with permission from van Lier 1995: 74)

an onion metaphor (Figure 1) toward understanding the multi-layered nature of language, by illustrating its linguistically-inflected building blocks.

In line with his nested understanding of language, van Lier (2004) later asserted:

> An ecological [SLA] theory holds that if you take the context away there is no language left to be studied. It's like an *onion*. You cannot peel away the layers and hope to get to the "real" onion underneath: it's layers all the way down. So it is with language: it's context all the way down. (p. 20)

Van Lier's ecological approach to SLA, as mediated through his understanding of language, emphasized the significance of taking into account the context in which a learner is located. To develop his socioculturally-oriented SLA theory that foregrounded semiotics, van Lier (2004) drew on developments in a host of disciplines: psychology (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Gibson 1979), philosophy and semiotics (Peirce 1992), and anthropology (Bateson 1972) [For a development of ecological theory in general, see Pinnow (2013)]. Particular attention was given to the affordances available to language learners who engaged in productive meaning making. Equally important was the role of the environment in shaping the language learning experience, with much attention given to the interaction between the learners and micro-systems (e.g., classrooms), meso-systems (e.g., schools), and exo-systems (government), an idea which he borrowed from Bronfenbrenner (1979; see Figure 2).

Van Lier's ecological understanding of how languages are acquired found a corollary in a series of related SLA publications (e.g., Atkinson et al. 2007; Kramsch 2003; Lantolf and Thorne 2006; Leather and van Dam 2003), all of which also highlighted the embodied aspects of language learning and the crucial role that the ecology in which a learner is situated plays in shaping learning. Such ecological importance figured prominently in the transdisciplinary framework for SLA introduced by the Douglas Fir Group (2016). Acknowledging the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979), this framework conceives of a language learning ecology along neurological,

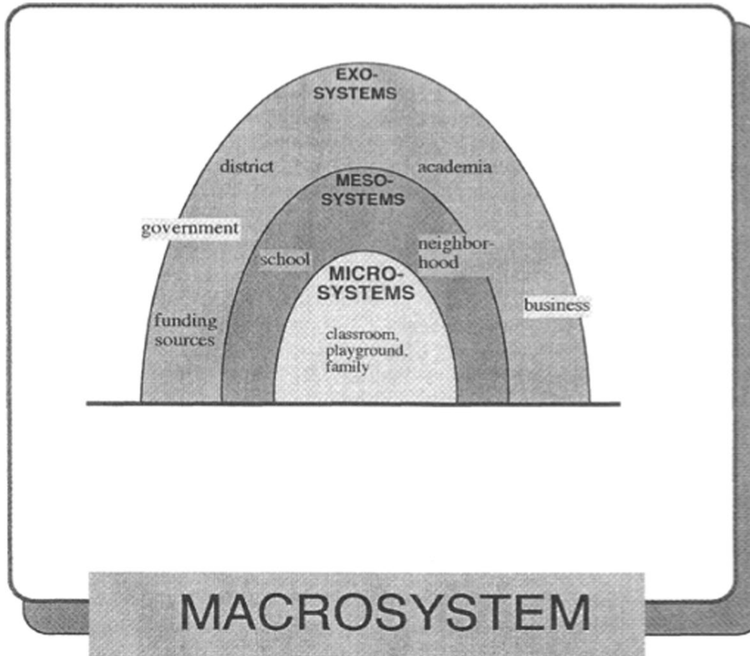

Figure 2 Macrosystem. (Reproduced with permission from Bronfenbrenner 1979; as cited in van Lier 2004: 209)

individual, micro-level (e.g., linguistic), meso-level (e.g., social identities) and macro-level (e.g., political values) lines. Importantly, as the Douglas Fir Group points out, the interactions between and across these different levels determine the type and quality of the language learning experience. Also of significance to this paper is the role of social identities in influencing language acquisition.

To close this section, and to reiterate the importance of examining language acquisition through an identity lens, a point to which we will return later, we invoke van Lier and Walqui (2012) and apply their understanding of language (see Table 1) to highlight what we see to be key characteristics of ecologically-oriented language learning, which among other things highlight the importance of identity as seen in Item #3 in Table 1.

Table 1 An ecological conceptualization of language and language learning

Characteristics of *language* (Van Lier and Walqui 2012: 5)	Characteristics of *language learning* (Authors, this paper)
1. Embodied	1. Embodied
2. Tightly integrated with the physical world around us	2. Tightly integrated with the physical world around us
3. Embedded in the social world of human relationships and identity	3. Embedded in the social world of human relationships and identity
4. Represents the historical, cultural and symbolic worlds that humans create	4. Represents the historical, cultural and symbolic worlds that humans create

Ecological LPP

As noted, the work of van Lier, in particular, has been central in advancing an ecological understanding of how languages are acquired. Van Lier's influence is underscored below by Canagarajah (2016) and Pennycook (2016), who themselves have also written extensively about LPP (see Canagarajah 2005; Pennycook 2004 for a discussion of language policy).

> Ecological models (van Lier 1995, 2004) suggest that learners can meaningfully engage with diverse learning resources, transforming them as affordances for their learning. Teaching materials and other artifacts (such as student texts and peer commentary), diverse agents (peers as well as teachers), institutional structures (such as *policies* and curriculum), and situational affordances (such as the objects, space, and material resources) can be negotiated by learners for effective learning. (Canagarajah 2016: 21; *emphasis added*)

> As van Lier (2000) explains … an ecological perspective emphasizes the notion of emergence from a range of interactions that occur in the wider environment. (Pennycook 2016: 11)

As discussed, how the individual interacts with the environment, through a range of affordances, is the hallmark of an ecological approach. That these affordances bleed across porous boundaries that straddle the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of existence is reinforced by Pennycook's (2016) declaration that we have now "entered the era of the Anthropocene," which is characterized by "a dynamic interrelationship between different materialities" (pp. 4–5). Given that this paper also focuses on language acquisition through an identity lens by examining how different materialities influence a Uyghur youth's learning of Putonghua, perhaps the most relevant LPP ecological framework that addresses language acquisition is that proposed by Ricento and Hornberger (1996). This seminal article introduced the metaphor of an onion to address the multiple layers through which language policy moves and develops. As stated by Ricento and Hornberger, because LPP research up to that point had been unsuccessful in accounting for activity in all institutional layers, the ways in which policies were negotiated, manipulated, and reinterpreted were therefore overlooked (for an update of this framework and its ethnographic application to multilingual LPP contexts, see Hornberger and Johnson 2007).

What is noteworthy about Ricento and Hornberger's (1996) onion metaphor for LPP research is that it set into motion an understanding that learners and teachers could take active roles in negotiating language policies, which was a stark contrast to the top-down structural historical approach (e.g., Tollefson 1991) that had defined much of the LPP work conducted in the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, the agentive stance conveyed in Ricento and Hornberger sparked a new wave of LPP research (e.g., Canagarajah 2005; Crandall and Bailey 2018; Lin and Martin 2005; McCarty 2011; Menken and García 2010) that examined how local actors such as learners and teachers could reclaim and negotiate language policy on their own terms. At the same time, and given the growing focus on individual agents, identity politics was pushed to the fore, especially in language-in-education research (e.g., Borman et al.

2014; McCarty and May 2017), thereby underscoring the central presence of identity in LPP work.

In short, the LPP and SLA research agendas appear to have developed along parallel tracks, with both taking an ecological turn on a general level and a converging interest in identity. It is to this construct of identity in SLA research that we now turn in order to illustrate how LPP research can be informed by developments in SLA identity work (see De Costa and Norton 2016; Norton and De Costa 2018) that place individual learners at the center of the language learning enterprise and engage with their unequal access to resources. While such learners can sometimes be language policy makers in their own right, they also often have to negotiate language policies implemented and imposed upon them by their families, schools and government. Thus, by turning to developments in SLA identity work, LPP researchers can gain a better understanding of the material realities of learners, which in turn can allow meso- (e.g., school) and macro-level (e.g., government) language policy makers to consider the impact of policies on the everyday lives of individuals.

Advancing the LPP research agenda: insights from SLA identity work

Up to this juncture, and in agreement with Tollefson and Pérez-Milans (2018), we have argued that contemporary LPP research needs to examine *how* individuals adopt subject positions and identities as they go about learning and using languages. Such a focus on identity is also aligned with an ecologically-oriented understanding of language learning, which is seen to be (1) embodied, (2) tightly integrated with the physical world around us, (3) embedded in the social world of human relationships and identity, and (4) represent the historical, cultural and symbolic worlds that humans create (see Table 1). Crucially, this view of language learning is consistent with recent ecological developments in LPP research which (1) have been guided by the construct of identity (e.g. Crandall and Bailey 2018), and (2) emphasize the agency of learners who often have to manage the complex dynamics surrounding them (e.g. Menken and García 2010).

Admittedly, the ecological framework put forward by the Douglas Fir Group (2016) acknowledges the importance (see Figure 3) of identity because identity is one of 10 themes related to language learning identified by the group of authors. As illustrated in this framework, social identities (1) reside at the meso-level of sociocultural institutions and communities, and (2) intersect with investment, agency, and power. However, this position paper does not explore the explanatory potential of identity as a theoretical construct in sufficient depth, thereby failing to communicate fully the power of identity as a construct in SLA and, by extension, LPP. To plug this theoretical gap, we turn to an identity-related construct, *investment*, established by Norton (2013, 2015).

The notion of investment acknowledges the complex identity of a language learner which changes across space and time and that gets reproduced in social

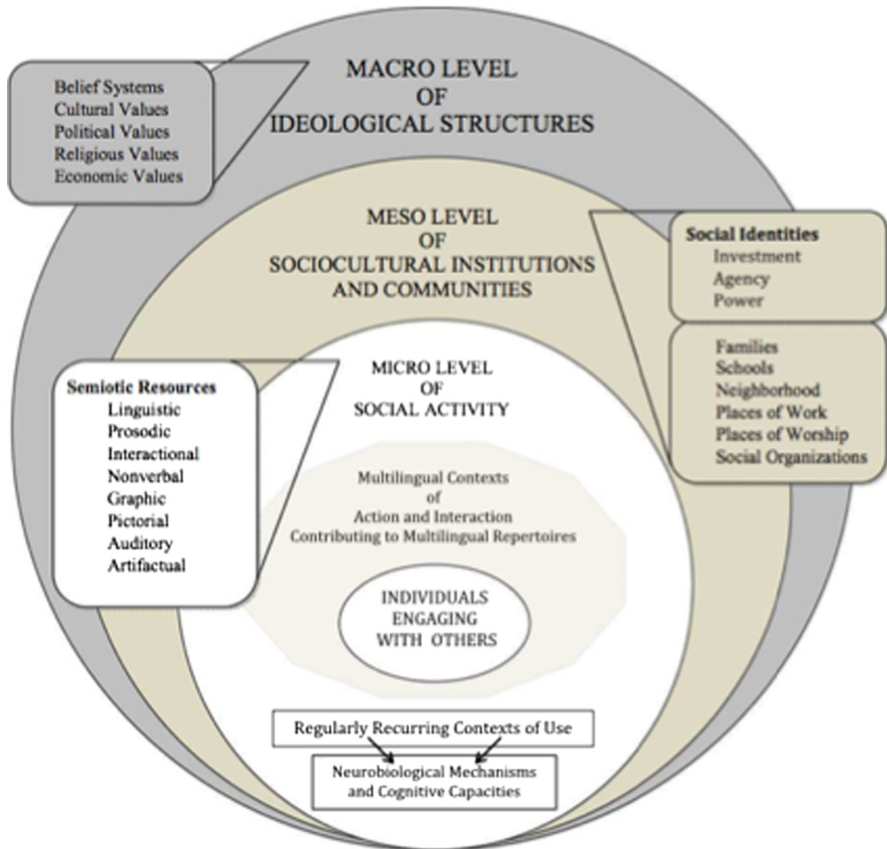

Figure 3 A transdisciplinary framework for SLA in a multilingual world. (Reproduced with permission from Douglas Fir Group 2016: 25)

interaction as a result of power relations. Its relevance to the Chinese context, in particular, has been established by established SLA scholars (e.g., Arkoudis and Davison 2008; Norton and Gao 2008) who have highlighted the commitment of Chinese students to learn English. In a recent update of this construct, Darvin and Norton (2015) developed a multi-layered and multidirectional model of investment (see Figure 4) to illustrate how power circulates in society, resulting in modes of inclusion and exclusion that go beyond language.

This model, which locates investment at the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology, recognizes how learners' resources are valued differently in multiple spaces. As we will demonstrate in the remainder of this paper, an understanding of learner investment from a SLA perspective is vitally important in trying to unpack how our focal learner, Alim (a pseudonym), negotiated a national Putonghua language policy. But before we introduce Alim, an Uyghur youth from Xinjiang, we

Figure 4 Darvin and Norton's model of investment. (Reproduced with permission from Darvin and Norton 2015: 42)

need to situate him within China's broader complex language ecology and Xinjiang's education system.

China's complex language-in-education ecology: insights from Xinjiang's education system

Ma (2016) reports that there are over 80 languages spoken among the 55 ethnic minority groups officially recognized in China, with the majority residing in the economically underdeveloped regions of Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, and Ningxia, and with Uyghurs forming the second largest group. That they constituted 45.8% of the Xinjiang population in 2010 (National Bureau of Statistics of the PRC 2010) warrants closer examination of the educational challenges encountered by Uyghur youth. Further, as a consequence of the recent ethnic and religious tensions and because of Xinjiang's strategic role in the Belt and Road initiative, the central government has placed great emphasis on national unity, stability and economic development in this region (Sharma and Kundu 2016). This new initiative and its impact on Uyghur youth is another compelling reason to investigate this community.

Significantly, what binds the Uyghurs and other minority ethnic groups in Xinjiang and the rest of the country together is the national language, Putonghua, whose dominant place is entrenched in a 2001 Language Law (Rohsenow 2007). The language policy landscape of China is further complicated by China's desire for economic development and modernization. Thus, as globalization increases, English and English learning have become more highly valued (Pan 2011). Given the importance of English and recognizing the need for linguistic minorities to also acquire Putonghua, the central government put forward a trilingual education policy in 2002. Uyghur youth like Alim therefore learn Putonghua as a second language and English as a third language at school, in addition to their mother tongue, Uyghur.[1] According to Zhou (2004), ethnic minorities in China often have to choose between

[1] In his overview of language policy across China, Wang (2017) divides language policies into the following four categories: (1) explicit policies to manage Chinese minority ethnic groups' use of language in education; (2) policies that focus on Chinese students' acquisition and use of languages—including Chinese and English—in education; (3) policies that addresses international students who come to China

preserving their own language and culture, and achieving upward social mobility through mastery of Putonghua.

In keeping with the national trilingual policy, Uyghur youth are mandated to start learning Putonghua at Grade 3, and there has been a growing interest to enroll such students in bilingual programs, with plans to expand 3-year bilingual pre-school programs to 4387 bilingual kindergartens in Xinjiang in 2017 ("Comments on the implementation of the bilingual education work in Xinjiang", http://www.chinadaily.com.cn). At the elementary level, two main types of schools exist: (1) *minzu* schools for ethnic minority students, where Uyghur is the medium of instruction; and (2) *hanzu* schools, which are mainly attended by Han students and where Putonghua is the medium of instruction, with English taught as a third language starting from Grade 3.[2] Of these two categories of elementary schools, *minzu* schools have traditionally been known to be the most poorly resourced among institutions (Tsung and Cruickshank 2009).

At the middle and high school level, and to bridge the income gap between the rich and the poor in Xinjiang, the Chinese government established two boarding school programs—*neichu ban* (within Xinjiang) and *neigao ban* (outside Xinjiang)—that provide Uyghur children from peasant families with free quality education[3] besides the local middle and high schools. Importantly, the *neichu ban* and *neigao ban* programs provide Uyghur students with the opportunities to receive comparable education to their Han counterparts.[4] Given that the medium of instruction in a *neichu ban* program is Putonghua, admission into this 3-year program is contingent on the Uyghur students' Putonghua proficiency. To help Uyghur students better transition into mixed classes with Han students and the middle school curriculum, schools offer bridging courses that primarily teach spoken Putonghua and mathematics in the first semester (Chen 2008; Wu and Liu 2015). Upon graduation from a *neichu ban* program, these Uyghur students have the option to continue their studies in 4-year *neigao ban* programs offered at high schools in major cities outside of Xinjiang, which are generally located in the eastern part of China. The medium of instruction in these schools is Putonghua. Like their Han counterparts, Uyghur students who graduate from a *neigao ban* program take the national-level university entrance examination (*gaokao*). These students are beneficiaries of affirmative action measures that are in place to ensure that they secure university admission (for details of these measures, see Han et al. 2016). Finally, all Uyghur students and other

Footnote 1 (continued)
to study Chinese language and culture; and (4) policies that are concerned with international students who come to China to study content subjects (pp. 53–54).

[2] More recently, a third category of schools—*min han hexiao* schools—has emerged. These are primarily Han-dominant schools where Uyghur lessons are offered, or Uyghur-dominant schools where Putonghua is offered.

[3] Students enrolled in *neigchu ban* programs do not need to pay for tuition and living expenses. They only have to pay between 450 and 900 Yuan, depending on the financial standing of their families, to cover the cost of food, (http://www.xjedu.gov.cn/xjjyt/wjgz/wjtz/2004/18043.htm).

[4] Uyghur students do not receive mother tongue education in *Neichu ban* and *Neigao ban* programs.

Table 2 Standardized Chinese language proficiency test (minzu hanyu kaoshi) levels

Level	Requirements
I	Beginners who have received 400–800 class hours of modern Chinese training
2	Learners who have received 800–1200 class hours of modern Chinese training
3	Learners who have received 1200–1600 class hours of modern Chinese training
4	Learners who have received 1200–1600 class hours of modern Chinese training

ethnic minority students have to take a Chinese language proficiency test (*minzu hanyu kaoshi*) for non-native Chinese speakers (http://mhk.neea.edu.cn/html1/folder/15073/13-1.htm). This national-level standardized test is scaled across four levels (Levels I–IV; see Table 2). Unofficially, the first three levels map onto elementary school (Level 1), middle school (Level 2), and high school (Level 3) levels.

In spite of the existence of a trilingual policy that is mediated through the education system, it needs to be noted, however, that (1) not all languages are equally valued in China, and (2) not all learners have equal access to resources when it comes to acquiring Putonghua and English, as exemplified by the *neichu ban* and *neigao ban* programs described earlier. That China is beset with multilingual challenges is underscored by Gil and Adamson (2011) who observed that "fundamental cultural and political tensions remain" (p. 30) even though a national trilingual policy is in place. For example, Gil and Adamson contend that "the vast differences between mainland China's rich coastal provinces and poor inland provinces, as well as urban and rural areas, are well known and these differences determine both the opportunities to learn English and the quality of the learning experience" (pp. 39–40). This discrepancy can also be attributed to the fact that a wide range of bilingual education models exist in China, which further reflects the government's ambivalent attitude toward bilingual education (for an overview of these different models, see Adamson and Feng 2014).

The unequal status between Putonghua and Uyghur has also led to unidirectional integration (i.e., assimilation) because Uyghur language education is progressively removed from the school curriculum as a student advances through the education system. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that Han-dominant students often have little incentive to learn Uyghur in schools in Xinjiang.[5] In addition, the rise of English needs to be seen as taking place at the expense of Uyghur and thus has its own social repercussions, too (Han et al. 2016). In

[5] Given the complex set of sociolinguistic circumstances, the central government has adopted a series of preferential policies for ethnic minority students because it seeks to promote the development of the education of minority youth and to incorporate minority students into a modern, national education system. For example, ethnic minority students are offered additional points on their university entrance exams to enhance their opportunities for university acceptance, and a number of high schools in the more developed regions in China often take in Xinjiang youth in order to provide them with comparable quality education to their Han counterparts.

a similar vein, the learning of Putonghua has also come, at a price for Uyghur, with the former language associated with progress and civilization, and the latter language constructed as being backward and unscientific (Guo and Gu 2016). In short, at the national macro-level of ideological structures (Douglas Fir Group 2016; see Figure 3), Uyghur is seen to have less cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1991; Darvin and Norton 2015) when compared to both Putonghua and English.

This ideological stance, which places Putonghua higher than Uyghur on the linguistic hierarchy, extends to the meso-level of sociocultural institutions and communities (Douglas Fir Group 2016) and is mediated through a tiered schooling system. This system distinguishes minority students from mainstream Han students, who belong to the dominant ethnic group in China and are the second largest ethnic group in Xinjiang, accounting for around 40.4% of its entire people (National Bureau of Statistics of the PRC 2010). These schools, as we will demonstrate, play a key role in the social reproduction of social identities that align with the national ideology of developing Putonghua as a lingua franca. In short, ideologies trickle down from a national scale to that of a school, before moving on to an individual level (Douglas Fir Group 2016), which in turn fuels a personal investment (Darvin and Norton 2015; Norton 2013) in learning Putonghua. Such an investment, according to Guo and Gu (2016), is inexorably linked with identity making on a micro-interactional level. In their study of Uyghur university students' identity construction through multilingual practices in China, Guo and Gu (2016) report that their participants, who studied at a prestigious university in Shanghai, felt that a mastery of Putonghua facilitated their socialization in wider (i.e., Han-dominant) society. In particular, Guo and Gu's participants were invested in learning Putonghua in order to distance themselves from the negative stereotype of Uyghurs. Put simply, these students embraced Putonghua and mobilized their education to index the identities of elite Uyghur intellectuals. On the one hand, this sense of social distancing reflects a rejection of mainstream society's prevailing stereotypes towards less educated Uyghurs. On the other hand, such distancing also underscores their sense of superiority that stems from their successful education experiences, in contrast to their less educated fellow Uyghurs. To better understand such an attempt to project a positive image of a successful and enterprising Uyghur, we turn to our focal Putonghua learner, Alim, next.

The case of Alim: tracing his Putonghua learning trajectory

The data presented in this study are part of a larger project involving four Uyghur students. Alim was chosen because his investment in learning Putonghua has brought him considerable capital (Bourdieu 1991). Our data include multiple sources that are summarized in Table 3.

Due to space limitations, we focus on our retrospective interview data with Alim in order to illuminate his investment in acquiring Putonghua, and how he negotiated

Table 3 Data sources

Data sets	Content (quantity)
Interviews	Alim (10 interviews)
	Counsellor (1)
	English teacher (1)
	Department administrator (1)
	School administrator (Uyghur, 1)
	Uyghur friends (1 middle school classmate, 3 university classmates)
	Han friends (1 university roommate, 3 university classmates)
Texts and artifacts	Policy documents (6)
	Language learning materials (5)
	Participants' written work (e.g., assignments, journals) (8)
Observations	Part-time job at the cafeteria (2)
	Research group (12)
Media data	WeChat entries (34)
	Moment postings (23)

China's Putonghua policy. All interviews were originally conducted in Putonghua and have been translated into English. Alim spoke Uyghur, Putonghua and English as his first, second, and third languages, respectively. Originally from a small farming community, Ayikule, in Xinjiang, we learned about his Putonghua language learning experience from a series of interviews conducted with him over the course of the 2014–2016 academic year, when he was third-year undergraduate at Lotus University (a pseudonym) in Nanjing. Alim spent his elementary school years in a *minzu* school, where Uyghur was the medium of instruction. For his middle school education, he moved to a *neichu ban* boarding school in a different city in Xinjiang, Changji, where the medium of instruction was Putonghua. His high school years were spent in a *neigao ban* high school in Zhaoqing, on the east coast of China. His Putonghua language learning trajectory, which spanned four different locales over 16 years, is summarized in Table 4 and Figure 5.

As mentioned, Alim attended a *minzu* school in Ayikule. Recounting his experience in learning Putonghua, which he attributed to his teacher, he shared:

Table 4 Alim's Putonghua learning trajectory

Elementary school (6 years)	Middle School (3 years)	High School (4 years)	University (in his third year)
Ayikule (Aksu, Xinjiang; *minzu*)	Changji (Inside-Xinjiang; *neichu ban*)	Zhaoqing (Outside-Xinjiang, Guangdong; *neigao ban*)	Lotus University (Nanjing)
Medium of instruction			
Uyghur (Attended Chinese classes)	Putonghua (Attended English classes)	Putonghua and English	Putonghua and English

Figure 5 Alim's Putonghua learning trajectory on the Chinese mainland

> In Grade one, we even couldn't understand the simplest Chinese sentences in the class. I only knew how to say *ni hao* (how are you), *wo hao* (I am fine), where are you from, I am Uyghur, you are Han (11/04/2014).

The interview data above revealed that Alim only acquired basic Putonghua skills at his elementary school. That he was not introduced to more advanced Putonghua can be attributed to his teacher, who exposed his classmates and him to rudimentary Putonghua. Asked to describe his teacher, who himself was of Uyghur ethnicity, Alim noted:

> When he taught us Chinese, he just asked us to read the sentences in Chinese. We used Uyghur for classroom communication. When we graduated from the primary school, we could only recognize some simple Chinese characters, and knew how to "cross, press and pick" in Chinese writing (03/09/2016).

Alim's description of his in-school (meso-level) Putonghua learning experience corroborates with the findings of Adamson et al. (2013) who reported on the lack of qualified Uyghur teachers in *minzu* schools and their general lack of Putonghua proficiency, thereby illustrating how meso-level school learning is impacted by a lack of macro-level national support. In his desire to acquire the linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991; Darvin and Norton 2015; De Costa and Norton 2016) associated with Putonghua, a resourceful Alim sought to make up for this resource deficit by initiating micro-level conversation with Han construction workers in his village. As Alim explained,

> I knew that they [the construction workers] were not scholars, but their Chinese was very fluent. I'd like to talk with them … I knew it was important

> for us to communicate with native speakers. I was the only one in my primary school who took initiative to talk with Han Chinese. Even my teacher didn't do that (07/06/2016).

Admittedly, from a SLA perspective, the notion of the native speaker has been critiqued (e.g., Leung et al. 1997) in recent years. However, from Alim's perspective, the interactional opportunities afforded (van Lier 2004) by these construction workers inspired him to approach Han adults in his community in the hope of enhancing his linguistic capital. Thus, on a micro-level, Alim positioned himself in a way that gave him access to linguistic resources that were not available at a meso-level in his school. As stated, even Alim's teacher did not engage in conversations in Putonghua with Han speakers. By taking this bold step, Alim established himself as an individual with linguistic distinction (Bourdieu 1991).

Upon completing his elementary school education, Alim's peasant farmer father, who aspired for a more financially secure future for his children, made the firm decision to send his son to a boarding school in Changji that offered a *neichu ban* program. Thus, as exemplified by Alim's father's recognition of the capital (Bourdieu 1991) accorded to Putonghua, the national ideology of acquiring Putonghua had filtered down to the meso-level of the family. Such reinforcement to learn Putonghua also came from the school. While still located within Xinjiang, Changji was 671 miles from Alim's village, and Alim's new school exposed him to an educational setting where Putonghua was the medium of instruction. At this school, Putonghua was promoted over minority languages such as Uyghur, which was deemed to have less cultural capital (Bourdieu 1991). Thus at age 13, Alim found himself in a new city but was now located within a well-resourced middle school. Alim's first transitional year was challenging; asked about how he coped with a curriculum that was primarily in Putonghua, he revealed:

> I kept reading and reciting as she [the teacher] requested. I could not understand the passages assigned by her. Particularly, I could not understand those ancient Chinese essays and poems, because we had never studied ancient Chinese before. She told us that we did not need to know the meaning. I had no choice but to recite them crazily (04/13/2016).

At first glance, one might question the pedagogical value of recitation in order to acquire Putonghua. However, such a pedagogical practice implemented at the meso-level of the school (Douglas Fir Group 2016) enabled Alim to practice his pronunciation and develop a more standard Putonghua accent. This need to learn and recite classical Chinese poetry invites comparison to the experience of Guo and Gu's (2016) participants who sought to "appropriate valuable symbolic knowledge to position themselves as elite Uyghur intellectuals and to project a positive Uyghur image" (p. 10), as they wanted to distance themselves from the negative stereotype of Uyghurs that circulated at a macro-level in society. Thus, by immersing himself in Chinese poetry, Alim appeared to be expanding his opportunities for a successful possible future because he was invested (Darvin and Norton 2015) in developing a 'native-like' Putonghua accent in order to win social recognition among his Han peers and teachers. In fact, his personal

investment in acquiring Putonghua only seemed to grow stronger; outside of class, he joined the track and soccer teams because it enabled him to interact in Putonghua with his Han teammates. In class, Alim strategically positioned himself by volunteering to be the class representative for his Chinese course because it allowed him to interact more regularly with his teacher. In short, and in keeping with Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment (see Figure 4) that looks at the intersection between ideology, identity and capital, Alim's ideology towards Putonghua, which he valued for its attendant capital, solidified his investment in learning the language and led him to position himself as a good Putonghua language learner. Also noteworthy is how the ideologies with respect to learning Putonghua that circulated at the macro-national level overlapped with the meso-level ideologies of the middle school and Alim's personal (micro-level) language ideology. That these three levels were interrelated further suggest the applicability of the ecological framework for SLA in a multilingual world advanced by the Douglas Fir Group (2016).

Alim's micro-level investment in acquiring was further elevated when he entered a *neigao ban* program at an east coast boarding school in Zhaoqing. Like his middle school in Changji, Alim's high school was very well resourced, with more than 100 out of its 477 teachers having won awards for their excellent teaching and research. According to Alim, one teacher, Mr. Li, in particular, had a huge positive impact on him. Of Mr. Li, Alim noted:

> He recommended many books for us to read in library. He took us to the library every week on a regular basis. At the library, he would let us read any book we chose to read. In two hours, he would ask us to summarize what we had read, and talked about what we reflected on the book (04/13/2016).

In contrast to his middle school teacher who emphasized recitation, Mr. Li gave Alim and his classmates the freedom to select reading materials that interested them. Thus at the meso-level of his new school in Zhaoqing, Alim's learning was (1) scaffolded by an enthusiastic teacher who implemented a learner-centered pedagogy, and (2) supported by affordances that took the form of rich and relevant reading materials that appealed to him. In addition, being in a classroom and school context where he was constantly interacting with Han peers by using Putonghua further reinforced Alim's language development. Such linguistic sponsorship continued into his university education, which saw his investment in Putonghua yield social dividends. At Lotus University, Alim served as a valuable language broker by helping his professor communicate with the parents of minority students who only spoke Uyghur. Outside of the university, when he went to the city for recreational purposes, Alim regularly volunteered his assistance to local policemen who encountered difficulty communicating with Uyghurs. The next two interview quotes underscore Alim's depth of language learning because he seemed to grasp the importance of communication:

> I always told my Xinjiang friends that you studied language, Chinese or English in order to communicate with others, not just for examinations. You can't

> study hard for two months, and you stop studying language after the examination (05/09/2016).

> I don't think we need to speak Chinese so accurately. It is enough if you can make yourself understood. For example, for a Han guy from Guangdong, he definitely speaks Chinese with Guangdong accent. If you can understand him, or even can only understand 90% of what he says, I think that's enough. You needn't pronounce the word 100% correctly (07/06/2016).

The former quote underlines how Alim viewed learning Putonghua as a means to an end, the end being the ability to communicate effectively with others in Putonghua. The latter quote is also powerful because it (1) highlights the importance Alim places on intelligibility and his ability to look beyond a regional—in this case Guangdong—accent, and (2) suggests how his older and more mature self may have graduated from merely attempting to produce a 'native-like' Putonghua accent, as described earlier, to accepting a localized Putonghua accent on its own merit. Such maturity suggests that he may have overcome the myth of an idealized native speaker (Leung et al. 1997) of Putonghua. It was also interesting to learn how Alim had also begun to reap the rewards of his language learning investment. During his summer breaks, when he returned to Xinjiang, Alim put his command of Putonghua to productive use by working as a paid interpreter for local officials. And during the school year, Alim secured employment as the assistant manager at his university cafeteria that served minority students on the campus. Finally, it was also heartening to learn about how Alim used his Putonghua to help educate Han students about his religion, Islam. Putonghua subsequently became a means of stirring thoughtful discussion with his Han peers, many of whom knew little about the religious beliefs of Muslims. As disclosed by Alim:

> The Han students, and other ethnic minority students, can only communicate with others on some superficial topics. For us Muslims, we can use Chinese to talk about our religion. Religion is a kind of high-level philosophy. It can arouse many thought-provoking discussions (08/19/2015).

In sum, what started initially as a top-down Putonghua language policy subsequently underwent a fair degree of interpretation at the interpersonal level because this policy was then used in a constructive way to do more than just bring financial rewards at the micro-level, which of course it also did. Significantly, Alim also profited from his investment in learning Putonghua through advancing a social agenda by (1) enlarging his pool of Han friends, (2) helping fellow Uyghurs become socialized in their new contexts by offering them and those with whom they came into contact linguistic assistance, and (3) educating some of his Han peers who were relatively ignorant about Islam. In short, his linguistic capital gains extended beyond the micro-individual level in that they also benefitted others, specifically friends at the meso-level of his educational institution and, to some extent, the macro-level of society, as evidenced by his interpreting assistance to local officials and his genuine desire to educate others about his religious faith. In addition, one could argue that carrying out this complex set of social roles and indirectly curating an identity of an

educated Uyghur youth was, overall, an empowering experience for Alim as he may have also used Putonghua to indirectly subvert any negative stereotypes associated with Uyghurs.

Implications

Over the past two decades, the social (Block 2003; Firth and Wagner 1997) and ecological (Kramsch 2003; Leather and van Dam 2003; van Lier 2004) turn in SLA has heralded a greater interest in the social context of learning. The field of SLA has also witnessed calls to bridge the social-cognitive divide (e.g., Hulstjin et al. 2014), with the most recent attempt being the transdisciplinary framework put forward by the Douglas Fir Group (2016). In the spirit of promoting transdisciplinarity, we call for LPP scholars to build on advances in ecologically-oriented SLA research in general and SLA identity work in particular. To illustrate the need for an ecological and identity framing of LPP, we provided the portrait of Alim, a young Uyghur language learner of Putonghua. In particular, we demonstrated how his investment (Darvin and Norton 2015; Norton 2013) in learning the language was inextricably linked with language ideologies that permeated national, community, and individual levels, thereby lending testament to the crucial switchboard role that schools play in shaping language policy and language acquisition processes.

At the same time, by exploring how Putonghua language-in-education policy also originates from a macro-national level, we recognize the valuable insights on the power dynamics surrounding LPP processes that were gleaned from historical structural analysis (Tollefson 1991), thereby highlighting the language policy challenges that exist in China today. As observed by Tollefson (1991):

> Language planning-policy means the institutionalization of language as a basis for distinctions among social groups. That is, language policy is one mechanism for locating language within social structure so that language determines who has access to political power and economic resources. Language policy is one mechanism by which dominant groups establish hegemony in language use (p. 16).

Applying the above observation to Alim's Putonghua acquisition experience, the schools that he attended undoubtedly played a pivotal role institutionalizing Putonghua and emphasizing the linguistic and social differences between Han and linguistic minority groups such as the Uyghurs. Admittedly, the intended goal of advancing a Putonghua-centric language policy was to foster social integration through assimilation. However, our analysis of the education system also revealed gaps in the types and quality of resources that were available to students like Alim as he moved across a spectrum of schools. These gaps become more conspicuous when we focus on Alim's investment in acquiring Putonghua and his desire to develop and mobilize the identity of an elite Uyghur intellectual. Thus by (1) drawing on SLA identity research, and (2) examining the ways in which the Putonghua language-in-education policy cascaded through national (macro), school (meso) and individual (micro) levels, we illustrated how the close connections between the layers of the proverbial

onion alluded to by van Lier (1995, 2004) and Ricento and Hornberger (1996) warrant scrutiny because collectively, the various levels afforded us a helpful heuristic to better understand the lived material realities of individual language learners like Alim.

An identity-inflected ecological approach also provides us with a nuanced understanding of the roles of the nation-state, schools, and individuals in language policy making. Our data revealed that Alim's pragmatic ideological alignment with the state resulted in him taking on the identity of a proactive and strategic language learner whose investment in acquiring Putonghua led him to mobilize the resources available to him and to find new ones to support his learning. These resources included (1) the construction workers he encountered at his elementary school; (2) recitation exercises, extracurricular soccer activities, and class representative volunteer opportunities at his middle school; (3) active reading assignments given by his teacher at high school; and (4) a slew of responsibilities at university that allowed him to be a linguistic and cultural broker. Underpinning all these actions was more than just a desire for social mobility, however. Alim also seemed to crave social acceptance as a Uyghur youth. To ensure that he succeeded in a Han-dominant world, he actively engaged in a recasting of identity to become an elite Uyghur intellectual (Guo and Gu 2016), because he was also committed to (1) dispelling a negative circulating ideology surrounding Uyghurs and a general distrust of Uyghurs by Han people, and (2) managing the identity of a young Uyghur man distinguished by his formal education and Putonghua proficiency. Commendably, Alim chose to use Putonghua to enlighten Han peers about Islam, which was negatively constructed in the social imaginary.

On a broader level, such a context-sensitive approach to understanding language policy and one that takes into account the language learning investments of individuals like Alim may lead us to new ways of rethinking language rights. According to Pérez-Milans and Tollefson (2018), how we conceptualize language rights is still anchored in European language rights discourse that rests "on a liberal democratic notion of autonomous individuality and prioritizes a universal set of individual political freedoms and privileges over communal and environmental responsibilities" (p. 11).[6] Given the tremendous influence of the state in highly regulated countries such as China, it would be prudent for LPP scholars to also carefully consider the political economies and the material realities in which learners are embedded. Such a consideration will help scholars rethink language rights in ways that are socially and culturally relevant to local settings.

Next, this study invites further discussion on key systemic inequalities in Chinese society. Admittedly, Alim appears to be the proverbial poster boy for an ideological apparatus—the central Chinese government—that seeks to establish a new

[6] In their explicit call to move scholarship from China and elsewhere in East, South, and Southeast Asia toward the center of LPP research, Pérez-Milans and Tollefson (2018) add that concepts of *language*, *nation*, and *state* may be less useful than Confucian or Daoist understandings of these concepts, thereby suggesting the need to invoke ancient Chinese philosophy in order to better understand the complexities surrounding language policies and language rights in China.

generation of linguistic minorities who are compliant with realizing a national vision of Putonghua proficiency and unity. However, Alim's experience also amplifies the continued dominance of the Han majority over linguistic minority students like him. One may question, for example, why the onus to acquire Putonghua falls only on linguistic minorities, while a similar expectation to acquire Uyghur is not imposed on Han public servants such as the policemen described earlier. Relatedly, in focusing on Putonghua acquisition in this paper, we have not considered the acquisition (or lack thereof) of Uyghur at the meso-level of the school and family; it is instrumental that future LPP work look at Uyghur language acquisition on these two fronts and, in keeping with the ecological approach proposed in this paper, how these two social domains are ultimately influenced by micro-and macro-level impulses. Finally, we also need to recognize the limits of micro-level agency and individual identity management. To his credit, Alim demonstrated a valiant attempt to subvert negative Uyghur stereotypes associated through his own strategic ways. And while his efforts need to be applauded, one should also recognize that for change to be effected, an additive approach to bilingualism (Baker and Wright 2017; de Jong 2011) needs to be adopted on a national level. Such inclusive measures, coupled with identity-oriented critical language education that focuses on ethnolinguistic stereotype reduction, ought to be put in place if social equity is ever to be achieved. Thus, future LPP research may want to investigate how such efforts can be implemented to usher in long-term social change, which constitutes a central and enduring concern of SLA identity researchers who committed to the creation of equitable learning outcomes.

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