

The impact of Hengshui-style practices on the foreign language comprehensive abilities of grassroots students in a test-oriented context

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Abstract. In China's test-oriented educational context, standardized handwriting practices have gained widespread institutional adoption, with "Hengshui-style" handwriting emerging as a dominant format among students navigating high-stakes examination systems. For grassroots students, those operating under conditions of limited educational resources and constrained household cultural capital, such practices represent a particularly significant yet underexplored dimension of foreign language learning. Drawing on the language learning investment model, this study analyzes questionnaire responses from 68 grassroots students to evaluate the complex impacts of Hengshui-style practices across three dimensions: capital, ideology, and identity. The survey results reveal that 83.82% of grassroots students have undergone systematic Hengshui-style training, which serves as a viable path to obtaining cultural capital for standardized tests under resource-constrained conditions, with 88.24% of students confirming its positive scoring effect. However, while providing advantages for testing, the Hengshui-style simultaneously embeds the ideology of "form over content" deeply into students' mindsets, with 66.17% tending to prefer "safe and error-free" expressions, and progressively solidifies their identity as "test-oriented strategists." Thus, this study advocates leveraging mechanisms of diversified evaluation and resource integration to expand the types of capital available to learners and facilitate identity reconstruction on a deeper level.

Keywords: Hengshui-style, grassroots groups, capital transformation, language ideology

1. Introduction

In educational contexts broadly, handwriting has long been recognized as a foundational academic skill. Research indicates that fine motor activities, with writing as the predominant task, constitute a substantial portion of classroom time in formal schooling, and that handwriting difficulties are associated with diminished academic participation and performance [1]. In China's basic education system, the impact of handwriting quality on essay scores in foreign language tests is particularly pronounced. When examiners review neatly organized and standardized handwriting, their scoring tendencies often shift positively, a systemic pattern repeatedly observed in large-scale grading contexts rather than an isolated case of subjective bias. Against this institutional backdrop, "Hengshui-style" handwriting has gradually evolved from a regional practice into a

standardized format with widespread institutional significance, owing to its high compatibility with scoring criteria, relatively low training costs, and visible effectiveness in improving exam results.

For grassroots students, this phenomenon carries particular weight. This study defines grassroots students as those whose local educational resources are relatively scarce, whose learning primarily depends on unified in-school teaching arrangements, and who lack sufficient cultural capital at the household level to support their education. As Guo observed, families with limited educational backgrounds tend to rely on natural upbringing rather than collaborative development, characterized by restricted extracurricular engagement and limited transmission of academic cultural capital to children [2]. Structural barriers such as weak teaching faculty, limited extracurricular resources, and insufficient family support position this group at a consistent disadvantage in developing comprehensive language skills. In this context, Hengshui-style handwriting, with its clear efficacy in boosting exam scores, becomes a practical strategy for grassroots students seeking to accumulate exam-relevant cultural capital within an institutionally constrained environment [3].

Against this backdrop, analysis of preliminary survey data reveals that among the 68 respondents, 83.82% underwent systematic Hengshui-style handwriting training. However, nearly 70% of these students, while proficient in producing standardized writing formats, struggled to accurately explain the grammatical logic behind the sentences they composed. This uncovered a significant gap between the mechanical mastery of writing forms and the depth of language comprehension. As Hyland noted, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in high-stakes contexts frequently adopt safe writing strategies that reflect their identities as test-takers rather than meaning-makers, which is a tension that lies at the heart of this study [4]. Accordingly, this research aims to achieve the following objectives: to describe the characteristics and motivations behind grassroots students' engagement with Hengshui-style practices, to examine the dual impact of these practices on students' comprehensive foreign language abilities and cognitive patterns, to interpret the interactive mechanisms among the three dimensions of capital, ideology, and identity, and to propose teaching optimization strategies tailored to the resource constraints of grassroots students. To guide this inquiry, the study addresses four core questions. What are the current characteristics of Hengshui-style practices among grassroots students? What mechanisms operate in their capital accumulation process? How do these practices shape students' linguistic ideologies and learning identities? How do capital, ideology, and identity interact within the framework of Hengshui-style practices?

From a theoretical perspective, applying the investment model to the Chinese test-oriented context represents a meaningful theoretical extension. This approach enables researchers to move beyond the binary opposition of "exam efficacy" versus "educational alienation" by employing an integrated perspective that encompasses capital, ideology, and identity. From a practical perspective, grassroots students rely heavily on test-oriented pathways to achieve social mobility. Clarifying the multidimensional impact mechanisms of Hengshui-style practices can provide empirical evidence for frontline teachers seeking to balance exam preparation with the cultivation of comprehensive language abilities.

2. Literature review

2.1. Core theoretical framework: language learning investment model

The core analytical tool of this study is the language learning investment model, which builds upon foundational work on identity and investment while incorporating Bourdieu's capital theory and ideological critique from critical discourse analysis [3]. Unlike traditional motivational frameworks that categorize learners through binary dichotomies such as motivated versus unmotivated or confident versus anxious, the investment construct seeks to collapse these dichotomies, recognizing that the conditions of power in different

learning contexts can position learners in multiple and often unequal ways, leading to varying learning outcomes [3]. When learners invest in a language, they do so anticipating the acquisition of broader symbolic and material resources that will increase the value of their cultural capital and social power [3].

2.1.1. Capital dimension

Bourdieu distinguished cultural capital across three forms: the embodied state, comprising durable mental and bodily dispositions; the objectified state, taking the form of cultural goods; and the institutionalized state, which confers entirely original properties by providing formally recognized, legally guaranteed value that is independent of its bearer [5]. Critically, Bourdieu identified the domestic transmission of cultural capital as the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment, arguing that talent and ability are themselves the product of an investment of time and cultural capital [5]. This hidden transmission creates structural advantages for middle-class learners while leaving grassroots students disproportionately reliant on institutional training pathways. Darvin and Norton further emphasize that capital's value is contingent on recognition: once capital is perceived and recognized as legitimate, it assumes symbolic power that is fluid yet shaped by the dominant ideologies of specific fields [3].

Grassroots students' engagement with Hengshui-style practices thus represents a strategic investment in institutionalized cultural capital, a rational response to structural constraints. However, as Bourdieu cautioned, educational qualifications never function perfectly as currency because their value rises in proportion to the value of their bearer [5], meaning that institutionalized capital alone cannot fully overcome cumulative socioeconomic disadvantages.

2.1.2. Ideology dimension

The ideology dimension concerns the belief systems that govern language learning practices while often remaining implicit. As Darvin and Norton argue, ideology functions as a normative set of ideas constructed through symbolic power, through which arbitrary conventions are naturalized into commonsense assumptions [3]. In the context of Hengshui-style practices, ideologies such as writing conventions equating to language competence, and form taking precedence over content, constitute the central objects of critical scrutiny.

2.1.3. Identity dimension

Norton defines identity as how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future [6]. Darvin and Norton theorize that while habitus, shaped by prevailing ideologies, predisposes learners to think and act in certain ways, it is through desire and imagination that learners invest in practices capable of transforming their lives, though this transformative potential is constrained when the capital they desire becomes difficult to attain because of systemic patterns of control [3]. In Hengshui-style contexts, grassroots students' identity as exam technique masters becomes solidified through the space of institutional discipline and the time of repetitive training, while the tension between this identity and their potential identity as meaning-makers constitutes the central concern of this study's identity analysis.

In essence, the three dimensions form a cyclical, mutually reinforcing relationship: ideology defines what counts as "legitimate knowledge," thereby shaping the direction of capital accumulation; capital accumulation through routine practices internalizes ideology into learner identity; and identity positions, in turn, constrain learners' choices regarding future investment.

2.2. Current research status and research gaps

2.2.1. *Research status*

In the research trajectory of writing practices and identity construction, Ivanič conceptualized writing as a process of self-construction, laying the foundation for subsequent studies [7]. Building on this, Hyland found that EFL learners in high-stakes exam contexts tend to adopt safe writing strategies aligned with their identities as test-takers rather than meaning-makers [4]. However, existing studies exhibit a significant subject bias, with insufficient systematic attention to how grassroots students specifically negotiate their identities within standardized writing training.

Recent applications of the investment model to Chinese educational contexts have yielded important insights. Wang and Jiang explored Chinese university students' EMI experience through the lens of investment goals, capital, and future identities, uncovering a critical discrepancy between what students ideologically value and what practically benefits them [8]. They found that students tend to prefer English monolingualism ideologically while deriving practical benefits from translingual practices, calling for pedagogical interventions to narrow the discrepancy between practice and ideology [8]. This tension between ideological orientation and practical reality resonates closely with the situation of grassroots students in Hengshui-style contexts, where form-focused training conflicts with authentic meaning-making needs.

Expanding beyond formal classroom settings, Liu, Lee, and Ma examined Chinese EFL learners' AI-mediated informal digital learning, finding that in deregulated learning environments characterized by greater learner autonomy, students were able to develop critical awareness of how technological tools shape their behaviors and thoughts, and could engage in more versatile and creative language practices [9]. This stands in notable contrast to rigidly regulated exam-oriented contexts, where systematic institutional discipline constrains learners' capacity to reflect critically on how writing conventions shape their ideologies and identities.

Regarding writing conventions and linguistic ideology, Canagarajah argued that an overemphasis on writing norms may lead learners to internalize a utilitarian form over content ideology [10]. Guo's analysis of educational inequality in China provides empirical grounding for this concern, demonstrating that curriculum content in basic education often carries cultural biases that disadvantage rural and grassroots students [2]. Guo further identified a counter-school culture among rural students, which, despite appearing as individual resistance, ultimately represents obedience to their fate [2], a structural reproduction of social position. While Guo examined overt resistance behaviors, the present study investigates a subtler form of identity constraint: grassroots students in Hengshui-style contexts internalize the test-oriented strategist identity not through rebellion but through systematic discipline that gradually naturalizes safety-first expression as the commonsense norm.

2.2.2. *Research gap*

Based on a review of the literature, three major research gaps emerge. First, the process by which grassroots students negotiate their identities in exam-oriented contexts remains underexplored, particularly in comparison to university students in English Medium Instruction (EMI) settings [8] or learners in informal digital environments [9]. Building on this gap, applications of the three-dimensional model to the analysis of exam-oriented writing in the Chinese context are similarly lacking, especially with regard to how structural capital deficits shape investment strategies among resource-disadvantaged students. Finally, the structural tension between rigid institutional discipline and the development of critical literacy remains underexplored in exam-oriented educational contexts. Taken together, these gaps point to the need for a study that integrates identity negotiation, capital theory, and critical literacy within a unified analytical framework, a need that the present research seeks to address.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employs a predominantly quantitative descriptive survey to systematically investigate the impacts of Hengshui-style practices on grassroots students' foreign language comprehensive abilities. The investment model proposes that investment research should address three interconnected concerns: how learners are invested in their present and imagined identities; what they perceive as the benefits of investment and what capital serves as affordances for learning; and what systemic patterns of control constrain their capacity to acquire desired capital [3]. These three concerns directly inform the three research questions of this study, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Correspondence between research design and research questions

Research Question	Questionnaire Sections	Theoretical Dimension
RQ1: Capital accumulation characteristics	Parts 2 & 6	Capital
RQ2: Ideology and identity shaping	Parts 3 & 4	Ideology & Identity
RQ3: Three-dimensional interaction	Cross-dimensional analysis	Integrated

3.2. Sampling method

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy. Participants were required to meet three criteria: having undergone Hengshui-style handwriting training, being identified as Chinese EFL learners, and voluntarily participating in the survey. A total of 68 valid questionnaires were collected. Among the sample, 22.06% were male and 77.94% were female, with university students accounting for 89.71%. Regarding family location, 72.06% of respondents came from second-tier cities and below, and 26.47% reported having no access to external English learning resources. This distribution closely reflects the structural resource constraints characteristic of grassroots student populations, as documented in analyses of educational inequality in China [2].

3.3. Research tools

This study utilized a self-designed questionnaire comprising 24 items across six sections:

1. Basic information of respondents
2. Basics of Hengshui-style practices (capital dimension)
3. Perceptions of discipline and cognitive impacts (ideology dimension)
4. Balancing form and content (interaction between capital and identity)
5. Perceptions and attitudes toward the learning environment (identity tension)
6. Comprehensive feedback on overall impacts

Likert scale scoring was applied to all items. Reliability testing revealed an overall Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.82, indicating satisfactory internal consistency [11].

3.4. Data analysis

All collected data were anonymized before being imported into SPSS 26.0 for analysis. Descriptive statistics, multiple response analysis, and cross-analysis methods were employed to examine the distribution and interrelations of the three dimensions—capital, ideology, and identity.

4. Research findings

4.1. Current practices: high prevalence, exam-driven motivation, and resource dependence

Among the 68 surveyed students, 83.82% had undergone systematic Hengshui-style handwriting training. Analysis of training motivations revealed that test-oriented factors dominated: 73.53% identified "improving exam scores through neat writing" as the primary driver, 60.29% attributed participation to teacher mandates, and 52.94% cited alignment with standardized norms. By contrast, parental suggestion (11.76%) and widespread peer practice (27.94%) exerted considerably less influence. As illustrated in Figure 1, the widespread adoption of Hengshui-style handwriting is primarily driven by institutional disciplinary power rather than family cultural transmission or peer influence.

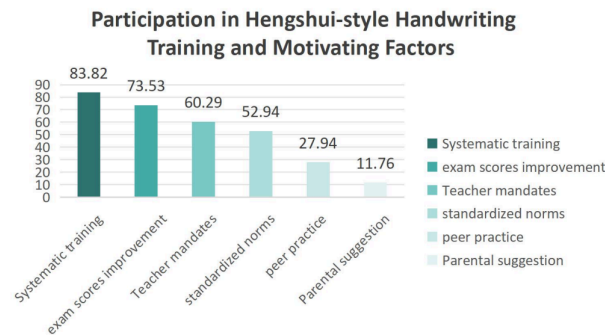


Figure 1. Participation in Hengshui-style handwriting training and motivating factors

The underlying logic of this motivational structure becomes clearer when considered alongside respondents' resource backgrounds. Among participants, 72.06% were from second-tier or lower-tier cities, and 26.47% reported having no access to external English learning resources. While some students had limited exposure to supplementary learning channels, 51.47% through premium app subscriptions and 45.59% through private tutoring, such resources remained fragmented and unsystematic. Guo documented analogously that grassroots families face compounding disadvantages in accessing educational opportunities, with structural resource gaps that cannot be bridged through individual effort alone [2]. As shown in Figure 2, faced with these structural constraints, a low-barrier, exam-oriented handwriting skill with tangible score-improvement outcomes becomes one of the most accessible capital accumulation strategies available to grassroots students within the institutional framework.

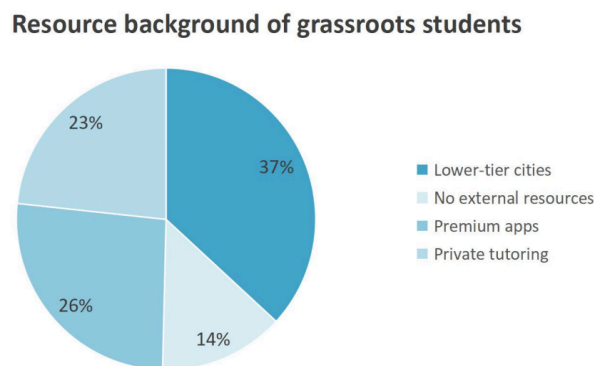


Figure 2. Resource background of grassroots students

4.2. Dual impact: acquisition of exam-focused capital and erosion of comprehensive abilities

In terms of exam-focused capital accumulation, the data demonstrates consistently positive feedback. A total of 88.24% of respondents believed that Hengshui-style handwriting positively influenced their writing scores ("significantly improved" 48.53%, and "slightly improved" 39.71%), and 77.94% confirmed that neat handwriting helps secure higher marks. The 83.82% training prevalence reinforces the 73.53% exam-driven motivation in a self-reinforcing cycle: students invest in training due to exam-oriented needs, and the tangible benefits reinforce continued reliance on this pathway. As illustrated in Figure 3, this pattern illustrates what Darwin and Norton describe as investment driven by the anticipation of acquiring wider symbolic and material resources [3]. In this case, institutionalized capital in the form of exam scores convertible into educational credentials and social mobility opportunities.

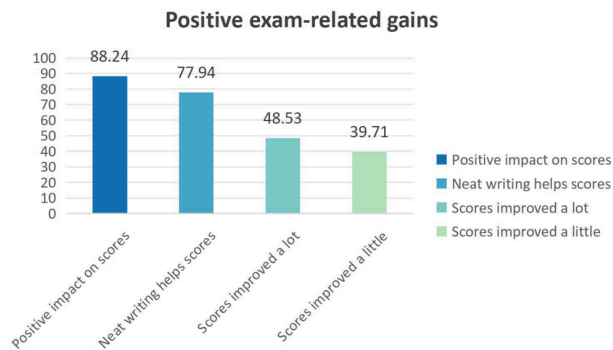


Figure 3. Positive exam-related gains from Hengshui-style handwriting training

However, the flipside of capital acquisition reveals a series of concerning erosion trends. A total of 51.47% of students reported that handwriting training distracted their attention from content development (mean score: 3.43), and 39.71% felt it encroached upon practice time for listening, speaking, and reading (mean score: 3.03). A deeper level of erosion emerges in content expression: 41.18% of respondents admitted to deliberately restricting creative expression due to concerns over handwriting format; among them, 36.76% avoided using "relatively complex or unfamiliar vocabulary" and 32.35% refrained from employing complex sentence structures. As shown in Figure 4, nearly half of the students reported sacrificing the richness of their language expression to maintain handwriting standards, a form of self-censorship that penetrates language choice at its core rather than merely redistributing time resources.

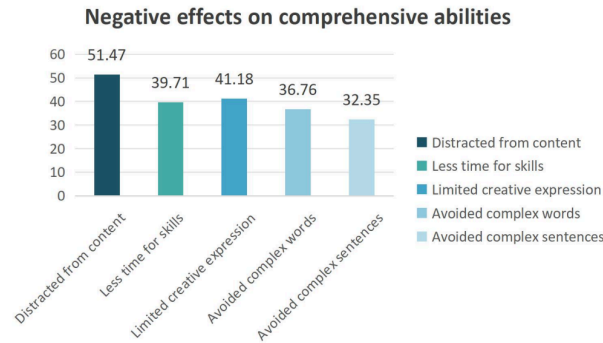


Figure 4. Negative effects on comprehensive abilities

This imbalance becomes even more evident in how students prioritize writing aspects. The proportion prioritizing "grammatical accuracy" (67.65%) and "neat and uniform handwriting" (55.88%) far surpasses those valuing "content depth" (50%), "logical coherence" (39.71%), and "vocabulary diversity" (20.59%). Formal elements dominate absolutely while cognitive and content-based dimensions are significantly marginalized. This narrow prioritization parallels the concern raised by Van Hartingsveldt et al., who found that assessment instruments focused on handwriting form tend to overlook critical dimensions of communicative performance [1], a pattern that, when institutionalized, systematically devalues the very competencies essential for authentic language use. As illustrated in Figure 5, formal elements such as grammatical accuracy and neat handwriting dominate student priorities, while cognitive and content-based dimensions such as vocabulary diversity and logical coherence are significantly marginalized, and notably, 82.35% of students still rated the overall impact of Hengshui-style practices as "positive," highlighting a significant disconnect between perceived benefits and the hidden trade-offs.

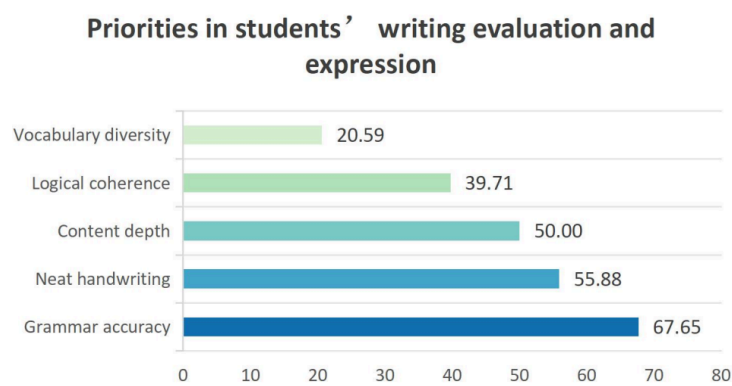


Figure 5. Priorities in students' writing evaluation and expression

4.3. Disciplinary effects on thinking: internalized rules, safety priority, and the tension of autonomous expression

The data shows that 64.7% of students have developed fixed handwriting muscle memory (mean score: 3.75), and 55.88% agreed that Hengshui-style handwriting represents "rule compliance" rather than personal stylistic choice (mean score: 3.66). This process transcends mere skill acquisition; it reflects a transformation from external institutional constraint to internalized recognition, through which students come to equate Hengshui-style norms with what writing itself should look like. This disciplinary process subsequently extends into broader cognitive domains: 67.65% of respondents reported that sustained practice has made them more inclined toward "rule compliance" in their behavior and thinking more generally. This tendency has expanded across multiple dimensions, including essay templates (55.88%), exam formats (52.94%), foreign language grammar rules (39.71%), and answering guidelines (36.76%).

The clearest manifestation of these disciplinary effects is the deep entrenchment of a "safety-first" expression strategy. The mean score for "greater preference for safe, error-free expressions" reached 3.9, the highest value across all questionnaire items, with 66.17% of respondents partially or fully endorsing this description. This finding resonates with Darwin and Norton's observation that learners whose habitus has been shaped by dominant ideologies may find that the capital they desire becomes difficult to attain because of systemic patterns of control [3]. In the present case, the ideology of formal correctness has been so thoroughly internalized that creative expression itself comes to feel risky and illegitimate. Correspondingly, 41.18% of

students admitted to abandoning creative expression out of concern for handwriting-related issues, illustrating how formal discipline gradually evolves into a guiding value system governing expressive choices.

Yet within this disciplinary framework lies the most tension-filled finding of this study: 70.59% of students expressed a strong desire for greater space for autonomous expression (mean score: 3.87). As shown in Figure 6, the inertia of a safety-first expression coexists within the same group as a strong aspiration for expressive autonomy—a tension that reflects what Norton identified as the capacity of learners to simultaneously inhabit and resist the subject positions assigned to them by institutional structures [6], and one that remains unresolved precisely because the structural conditions producing it remain intact.

Disciplinary effects, internalized rules, and the tension of autonomous expression

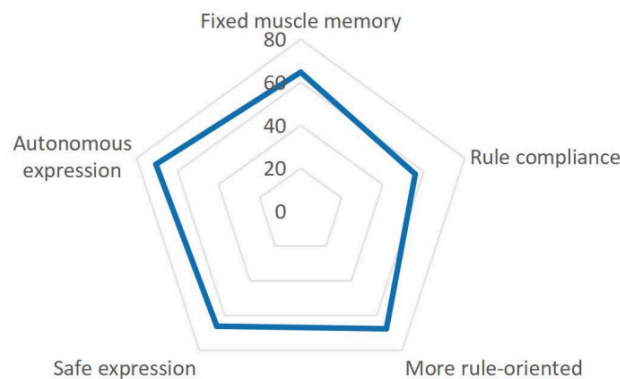


Figure 6. Disciplinary effects, internalized rules, and the tension of autonomous expression

5. Discussion

5.1. Capital dimension: strategic investment under structural constraints

The findings confirm that grassroots students' engagement with Hengshui-style practices represents a rational form of capital investment under structurally constrained conditions. As Darwin and Norton theorize, learners invest in language practices with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources [3]. For grassroots students facing the resource landscape documented in this study, 72.06% from lower-tier cities, 26.47% without access to external learning resources, Hengshui-style training offers an institutionally validated, low-barrier pathway to accumulating the kind of capital most readily convertible into exam scores.

This investment logic can be further illuminated through Bourdieu's distinction between capital forms [5]. The domestic transmission of cultural capital, which Bourdieu identified as "the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment" [5], operates silently to advantage students from middle-class families who absorb embodied cultural capital, aesthetic sensibilities, linguistic confidence, and risk-taking dispositions through everyday family interaction. Grassroots students, denied access to this hidden transmission due to the "natural upbringing" logic of their family environments [2], must instead pursue institutionalized capital through explicit, systematic training. The result, as Bourdieu cautioned, is that educational qualifications never function perfectly as currency because their ultimate value rises in proportion to the value of their bearer [5]. Hengshui-style investment thus yields measurable short-term returns in exam

performance, 88.24% confirmed score improvement, while leaving the underlying structural disadvantage largely intact.

Furthermore, Darvin and Norton remind us that capital conversion "is always a site of struggle, given that what may be valued in one place may be radically devalued in another" [3]. The institutionalized capital accumulated through Hengshui-style training holds considerable symbolic value within the exam-oriented field. However, this same capital carries little currency in communicative contexts that reward fluency, creativity, and meaning-making, precisely the contexts in which grassroots students' comprehensive language abilities are most urgently needed for long-term social mobility. The self-reinforcing investment cycle identified in this study, where exam-driven motivation produces training, which produces score gains, which reinforce further training, thus represents a form of capital accumulation that progressively narrows rather than expands the learner's range of available resources.

5.2. Ideology dimension: the naturalization of form-over-content

The ideological dimension of Hengshui-style practices is perhaps its most consequential and least visible aspect. As Darvin and Norton argue, ideology functions by making "the arbitrary appear as the natural order" [3], transforming historically contingent conventions into taken-for-granted truths. The data from this study provide compelling evidence that the "form over content" ideology embedded in Hengshui-style training has achieved precisely this naturalization among grassroots students.

The 66.17% endorsement of safety-first expression preferences, the 67.65% prioritization of grammatical accuracy over content depth, and the 55.88% tendency to equate Hengshui-style with normative writing standards collectively indicate that institutional discipline has been absorbed into students' habitus. This process mirrors what Canagarajah described as the internalization of a utilitarian ideology through sustained exposure to norm-focused writing instruction [10]. Crucially, this internalization is not experienced as a constraint but as common sense, students do not perceive themselves as restricted but as competent practitioners of legitimate writing.

Wang and Jiang identified a closely parallel dynamic in their study of Chinese university students in EMI contexts, where students ideologically privileged English monolingualism despite deriving greater practical benefit from translingual practices [8]. In both cases, students' ideological orientations lead them to devalue the very resources, creative expression, and translingual repertoires that would most enhance their comprehensive communicative competence. The "knowledge gap" identified by Wang and Jiang between practice and ideology [8] is similarly operative here: grassroots students have not been equipped with the critical language awareness needed to recognize and interrogate the ideological foundations of the evaluation systems that shape their learning choices.

5.3. Identity dimension: solidification and the desire for reconstruction

Norton defines identity as the ongoing construction of one's relationship to the world across time and space and one's understanding of possibilities for the future [6]. Hengshui-style practices shape this construction along both dimensions: across time, through years of repetitive disciplinary training that develops fixed muscle memory and rule-compliance orientations; across space, through the institutional environment of the exam hall that positions students as "test-oriented strategists" rather than communicative agents.

The resulting identity solidification carries significant implications for learners' imagined futures. Darvin and Norton emphasize that investment is always oriented toward imagined identities, learners invest in practices that they believe will connect their present selves to desired future positions [3]. For grassroots students, the "test-oriented strategist" identity offers a coherent and institutionally validated self-understanding

within the exam-oriented field. Yet as the data reveals, this identity simultaneously forecloses other possibilities: the 41.18% who abandon creative expression and the 32.35% who avoid complex sentence structures are not merely making tactical writing decisions but enacting an identity that defines safe compliance as competence and risk-taking as failure.

Guo's analysis of "counter-school culture" provides a useful comparative lens here [2]. Guo found that apparent resistance among rural students ultimately represented "obedience to their fate" [2], a structural reproduction of social position disguised as individual agency. The grassroots students in this study exhibit an analogous dynamic, though in inverted form: rather than resisting institutional norms, they embrace them so thoroughly that the norms become constitutive of their self-understanding as learners. In both cases, the outcome is social reproduction rather than transformation.

The most significant finding, however, is the coexistence of identity solidification with a strong desire for autonomous expression among 70.59% of students. This tension suggests that the "test-oriented strategist" identity has not fully colonized these learners' sense of possible selves. As Darvin and Norton note, learners retain "the capacity to invest in learning that allows them not only to acquire material and symbolic resources in a way that reproduces the status quo, but also to dissect, question, and sometimes resist dominant practices" [3]. This residual desire for autonomy represents a potential site of pedagogical intervention—a crack in the disciplinary framework through which critical language awareness might be cultivated.

5.4. Interaction among the three dimensions

The three dimensions identified by Darvin and Norton do not operate independently but constitute a mutually reinforcing system [3]. In the context of Hengshui-style practices, their interaction can be traced through the following cyclical pattern:

The ideology of formal correctness, institutionally embedded in exam scoring rubrics and teacher mandates, defines Hengshui-style compliance as legitimate linguistic capital. This definition shapes students' capital investment decisions: under resource-constrained conditions, grassroots students rationally prioritize the acquisition of institutionalized writing capital that promises measurable exam returns. Sustained investment in this capital, through the repetitive physical and cognitive practice of Hengshui-style training, progressively internalizes the "form over content" ideology into students' habitus, reshaping their identity from that of a language learner into that of a test-oriented strategist. This consolidated identity then feeds back to reinforce the original ideological orientation. Students who identify as test-oriented strategists are predisposed to perceive formal compliance as the natural and appropriate goal of language learning, completing the cycle.

This cyclical dynamic helps explain one of the most striking findings of the study: the 82.35% positive overall evaluation of Hengshui-style practices despite substantial evidence of comprehensive ability erosion. Students who have undergone identity consolidation within this ideological framework evaluate their learning through the very criteria that the framework privileges, rendering the costs of the trade-off largely invisible. The "disconnect between perceived benefits and hidden trade-offs" identified in the findings is not a cognitive error but a predictable outcome of the three-dimensional cycle described above.

The contrast with Liu, Lee, and Ma's findings regarding AI-mediated informal learning is instructive [9]. In deregulated learning environments, Chinese EFL learners were able to develop critical awareness of how technological tools shape their behaviors and could engage in more versatile learning practices. The critical difference lies in the degree of ideological regulation: where informal contexts permit learners to interrogate and experiment with their learning tools, the exam-oriented field enforces a singular evaluative logic that forecloses critical reflection. Expanding grassroots students' access to diversified learning contexts, where

different forms of capital are recognized as legitimate, may thus be essential to disrupting the self-reinforcing cycle of ideology, capital, and identity documented in this study.

6. Conclusion

This study has employed the investment model to examine the complex and multidimensional impacts of Hengshui-style practices on the foreign language comprehensive abilities of grassroots students in China's test-oriented educational context. Through questionnaire analysis of 68 students, the study has documented a coherent pattern: Hengshui-style training functions as a rational capital investment strategy under structural constraints, yielding measurable exam-score benefits (88.24% positive feedback) while simultaneously embedding a "form over content" ideology (66.17% safety-first preference) that progressively solidifies students' identities as test-oriented strategists at the expense of their development as meaning-makers.

The three-dimensional analysis reveals that this pattern is not the product of individual learning choices but the predictable outcome of a self-reinforcing cycle in which institutional ideology shapes capital investment, capital accumulation internalizes ideology into identity, and consolidated identity reproduces ideological orientation. It is precisely because grassroots students are denied access to hidden cultural transmission that they become most dependent on institutional training pathways whose benefits are real but partial.

The residual desire for autonomous expression among 70.59% of students points to a productive tension that pedagogical intervention might harness. Regarding the multidimensional impacts of Hengshui-style practices on grassroots students' foreign language development, this study proposes three directions for teaching optimization. First, diversified evaluation mechanisms that formally recognize content depth, creative expression, and communicative fluency alongside formal correctness would expand the range of capital available to grassroots students and reduce the structural pressure toward form-focused investment. Second, explicit critical language awareness instruction that helps students interrogate how writing conventions, evaluation systems, and institutional norms shape their ideological orientations and identity constructions would equip them to make more informed and agentive investment decisions. Third, resource integration strategies that connect grassroots students with diverse learning contexts—including informal digital environments—would create opportunities for identity negotiation beyond the exam-oriented field, enabling students to recognize and mobilize a broader range of capital.

This study acknowledges several limitations. The sample size of 68 students and the significant gender imbalance (77.94% female) limit the generalizability of findings. The reliance on self-reported questionnaire data precludes deeper examination of the ideological and identity processes described, which would benefit from complementary qualitative methods such as interviews or classroom observation. Future research might address these limitations through longitudinal mixed-method designs that track the development of grassroots students' identities and investment patterns across educational transitions.

By bringing the investment model to bear on a distinctly Chinese educational phenomenon, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship applying the investment framework to non-Western contexts, while highlighting the particular vulnerabilities of structurally disadvantaged learners within exam-oriented systems. The hope is that these findings may inform both theoretical refinements of the investment model and practical efforts to create more equitable and comprehensive language education for grassroots students.

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