Article

Community Language Learning and Inclusive Participation: English Learning Among Women with Limited Formal Schooling in Urban China

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Abstract

Community language education can support communicative participation and social inclusion, yet access to such opportunities does not ensure that learners benefit equally. This life history-oriented qualitative study examined English learning among 12 women with limited formal schooling in two community education centres in urban China. Data were generated through two rounds of in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and programme documents. The findings show that community English learning provided a form of educational re-entry through which participants renegotiated self-perception, communicative agency, and imagined futures. These changes, however, were partial, fragile, and unevenly convertible beyond the classroom because of educational habitus,

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gendered care responsibilities, unequal access to capital, and selective institutional recognition. Drawing on transformative learning theory and Bourdieu, the study developed the Gendered Situated Transformation Framework (GSTF) to explain these differentiated outcomes. The findings suggest that inclusive community language provision requires not only accessible learning opportunities but also flexible participation arrangements and broader recognition of less visible forms of communicative and educational progress.

Keywords: community language education; English learning; communicative participation; social inclusion; women learners; adult education

Introduction

Adult education is frequently framed as a pathway to inclusion, employability, and lifelong self-improvement. Within this discourse, English occupies a distinctive place. English or adult education is not merely one skill among others, but a socially valued resource associated with competence, mobility, modernity, and legitimacy. For adults whose educational trajectories have been interrupted or constrained, learning English may signify far more than linguistic development. It may become tied to long-deferred educational desire, renewed claims to self-worth, maternal responsibility, and the hope of re-entering valued social worlds. Recent research on adult learning inequalities, women's learning, and community-based adult education has reinforced the need to understand adult participation as socially patterned rather than individually self-explanatory (Baumgartner and Shang 2025; Broek et al. 2023; Foley and Ollis 2024; Kroese 2025; Lee and Desjardins 2019).

These dynamics are especially significant for women with limited formal schooling in community adult education. Their participation in learning is often shaped by interrupted schooling, precarious work, care responsibilities, and restricted access to institutional recognition. Existing scholarship offers important foundations: Transformative learning theory highlights meaning-making and perspective change (Brookfield 2000; Mezirow 1991, 2000; Taylor 2007); language learning research has shown that learning is inseparable from identity, investment, and power (Block 2014; Darvin and Norton 2015; Norton 2013); and adult education research has demonstrated that participation is patterned by educational and social inequality (Boeren, Nicaise, and Baert 2010; Lee and Desjardins 2019; Pieńkosz, Petelewicz, and Piotrowska 2025; Youn and Shin 2026). Yet these strands have not sufficiently explained how women with limited formal schooling in community adult education experience English learning as a meaningful but unequal process of change.

This article addresses that gap by conceptualising English learning as a process of uneven self-transformation. The term refers to meaningful but socially differentiated and non-linear changes in self-perception, agency, and imagined futures that may remain fragile, reversible, and unequally convertible into wider social opportunity. To analyse this process, the article demonstrates the Gendered Situated Transformation

Framework (GSTF), which integrates transformative learning theory with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital. The framework is designed to explain not simply why learners may change, nor only why inequality constrains them, but how aspiration, recognition, agency, and inequality are co-produced in adult English learning itself.

The article addresses three research questions:

RQ1. How do women with limited formal schooling in community adult education narrate their pathways into English learning, and what social and biographical conditions shape these pathways?

RQ2. What forms of uneven self-transformation do these women associate with their English learning experiences?

RQ3. How are these transformative possibilities enabled, constrained, and differentiated by learners' gendered habitus and unequal access to economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital?

The article makes three contributions. First, it contributes to adult language learning research by showing that English learning in community settings can function as symbolic educational re-entry rather than merely as skill acquisition. Second, it contributes to transformative learning debates by showing that change is not later constrained by inequality, but constituted through unequal conditions from the outset. Third, it contributes to debates on educational equality by showing that access to learning does not guarantee equality in recognition, time, or convertibility.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

English Learning in Community Adult Education

Research on adult English learning has often been shaped by two broad and sometimes competing traditions. One frames English as human capital, emphasising employability, productivity, communication, and social inclusion. The other foregrounds identity, investment, and learner agency, stressing that language learning cannot be reduced to skill acquisition because it is shaped by desire, recognition, social positioning, and access to symbolic resources (Darvin and Norton 2015; Norton 2013). Both traditions have made important contributions, but neither is sufficient on its own for the purposes of this study.

Human-capital approaches tend to reduce English learning to utility. In doing so, they risk ignoring why English becomes desirable in the first place and why it carries such uneven emotional and symbolic weight. Identity-oriented approaches, by contrast, are better able to capture the subjective and social significance of language learning, yet they can still individualise participation by centring learners' investments, aspirations, or self-positioning without fully accounting for the institutional environments that make

some aspirations more credible, more legitimate, or more actionable than others. Recent work on adults with limited formal schooling in second-chance education confirms that participation is often shaped by multidimensional motivation and ambivalence rather than by single, transparent reasons (Mertens et al. 2025).

Critical applied linguistics has shown that English is not only useful but also socially consecrated. It often functions as a marker of competence, modernity, mobility, and legitimacy. Its value is reproduced through school systems, labour-market discourse, family aspiration, and popular narratives of self-improvement. This means that English is not encountered as a neutral linguistic object. It is encountered as a resource that can promise recognition while simultaneously intensifying hierarchy. Recent TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) scholarship has reinforced this point by showing that English teaching and learning are shaped by language ideologies, racialised and gendered expectations, and competing discourses of decolonisation and legitimacy (Baker et al. 2025; Bergström, Jonsson, and Shaswar 2025; Granger and Gerlach 2024; Sah and Fang 2025).

These tensions become especially visible in community adult education. Community adult education is not simply an alternative venue in which older learners take classes. It often sits at the intersection of educational provision, social support, welfare, and inclusionary governance. Programmes frequently serve adults whose participation in formal education was interrupted by poverty, care work, migration, school failure, or early labour-force entry. As a result, English learning in these settings is often encountered not as a continuation of mainstream educational progression, but as a return under conditions of interruption and marginality. Recent work on adult education's role in community capabilities and social participation highlights the importance of local programmes in widening access to learning and enabling adults to pursue study, work, and social participation in new ways (Foley and Ollis 2024). However, it also remains necessary to ask how these programmes organise recognition, whose learning is most visible, and what kinds of learner subjectivities are encouraged.

Women with Limited Formal Schooling, Educational Marginalisation, and the Limits of Empowerment

Scholarship on women's adult education has long challenged deficit-based understandings of adult women learners. Feminist work has shown that education can create spaces for confidence, public voice, reinterpretation, and renewed participation. Learning may allow women to question taken-for-granted roles, re-enter educational and social life, and articulate aspirations that were previously deferred. These contributions remain crucial because they resist treating women adult learners as merely lacking, dependent, or passive.

At the same time, feminist and critical scholars have repeatedly cautioned against celebrating empowerment too quickly. Participation in education does not occur on equal social terrain, nor does it yield equally durable or equally recognised forms of

change. Recent review work on women in adult learning shows that women are still commonly portrayed through narratives of resilience, multiple role management, and marginalisation, often in ways that obscure the structural conditions that shape learning trajectories (Baumgartner and Shang 2025). Likewise, recent work in learning and development has argued that equity for women requires attention not only to access, but also to the social arrangements that regulate whose learning is supported, recognised, and rewarded (Kroese 2025).

This problem is especially pronounced in relation to women with limited formal schooling. It functions as an analytic category that draws attention to a particular social positioning. Limited formal schooling is not simply a matter of years in school. It is also associated with restricted access to legitimate cultural capital, diminished recognition within educational institutions, and enduring feelings of not belonging in formal learning spaces. Recent second-chance education research shows that adults with limited formal schooling often carry the afterlife of school failure, stigma, and ambivalence into later learning experiences (Mertens et al. 2025; Raoufi-Kvist 2025). For women, these educational histories are frequently intertwined with gendered care obligations, domestic labour, and norms of self-sacrifice that regulate not only what they do, but what they feel entitled to want.

English learning intensifies these tensions. Because English is widely associated with education, competence, mobility, and modernity, it can become a particularly powerful site of aspiration for women with limited formal schooling. It may represent a second chance, access to recognised knowledge, or a way of supporting children's futures. Yet it may also reactivate shame, fear of exposure, and awareness of prior exclusion. A purely empowerment-oriented framework is inadequate. It may recognise confidence or voice, but it often struggles to explain why such changes remain fragile, selective, or difficult to convert into wider opportunities.

Rethinking Transformation

Transformative learning theory remains one of the most influential accounts of meaningful change in adult education. Mezirow (1991, 2000) conceptualises adult learning as involving critical reflection, reinterpretation of experience, and revision of one's frame of reference. Its enduring value lies in shifting attention away from the mere acquisition of information towards changes in meaning, self-understanding, and possible action. In studies of adult women's learning, this framework has been especially useful because it provides a language for analysing how learning can alter self-perception and future orientation.

Transformative learning theory has also been subject to sustained critique. Critics have noted its tendency to privilege rational reflection while underplaying affect, embodiment, relationality, and power (Brookfield 2000; Taylor 2007). More importantly for the present study, the theory does not adequately explain why transformation is unevenly possible, unevenly durable, and unevenly consequential

across differently positioned learners. To identify perspective, transformation has yet to explain whether that transformation can be enacted, recognised, or sustained under unequal conditions.

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital offer a powerful corrective. Habitus refers to durable dispositions formed through social history, while capital refers to valued resources that are unevenly distributed and differentially recognised. These concepts explain why educational participation is never entered on level terms and why similar participation may yield very different forms of benefit or recognition (Bourdieu 1977, 1986; Pieńkosz, Petelewicz, and Piotrowska 2025). However, a purely Bourdieusian reading also has limits. If the analysis stops at reproduction, participants' accounts of aspiration, reinterpretation, and emergent agency risk being flattened into structural effect. The task is not to let transformative learning explain meaning and Bourdieu explain inequality as separate layers. It is to reconceptualise transformation itself as a socially produced, unequal, and gendered process.

Bringing the two perspectives into dialogue also reveals a productive tension. Transformative learning foregrounds the possibility that adults can reinterpret experience and revise how they understand themselves, whereas Bourdieu directs attention to the socially structured conditions under which such revisions become possible, credible, and consequential. The former could risk implying that reflective change moves progressively towards greater agency; the latter could risk making social reproduction appear overly determining. Used together, however, they make it possible to examine transformation without assuming either unrestricted individual agency or complete structural closure. From this perspective, changes in meaning can be genuine while remaining difficult to enact, sustain, recognise, or convert into valued social advantage. This tension provides the theoretical basis for the GSTF and its emphasis on transformation as both subjectively experienced and structurally differentiated.

The Gendered Situated Transformation Framework

The GSTF was developed to address this challenge. Its central proposition is that transformation in community adult English learning is not an outcome unevenly distributed after participation; it is a socially differentiated process constituted through unequal conditions of participation from the outset.

The framework rests on three claims. First, English learning may reorient how learners understand themselves and their futures. Second, such reorientation is always mediated by habitus and unequal access to economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Third, because the learners in this study are women with limited formal schooling, transformation must be understood as gendered and situated, unfolding through relations shaped by care labour, classed respectability, interrupted schooling, and uneven entitlement to learn.

Within the GSTF, transformation is examined through three interrelated sensitising concepts: self-perception, agency, and imagined futures. Self-perception refers to learners' understanding of their competence, worth, and legitimacy. Agency refers to how they interpret and enact their capacity to speak, decide, and participate. Imagined futures refers to how they reconfigure what they regard as possible for themselves and their families. These are not fixed stages or guaranteed outcomes. They are analytic entry points that allowed the study to examine how learning-related change becomes thinkable, narratable, and recognisable under unequal conditions. The relationships among these elements are summarised in Figure 1.

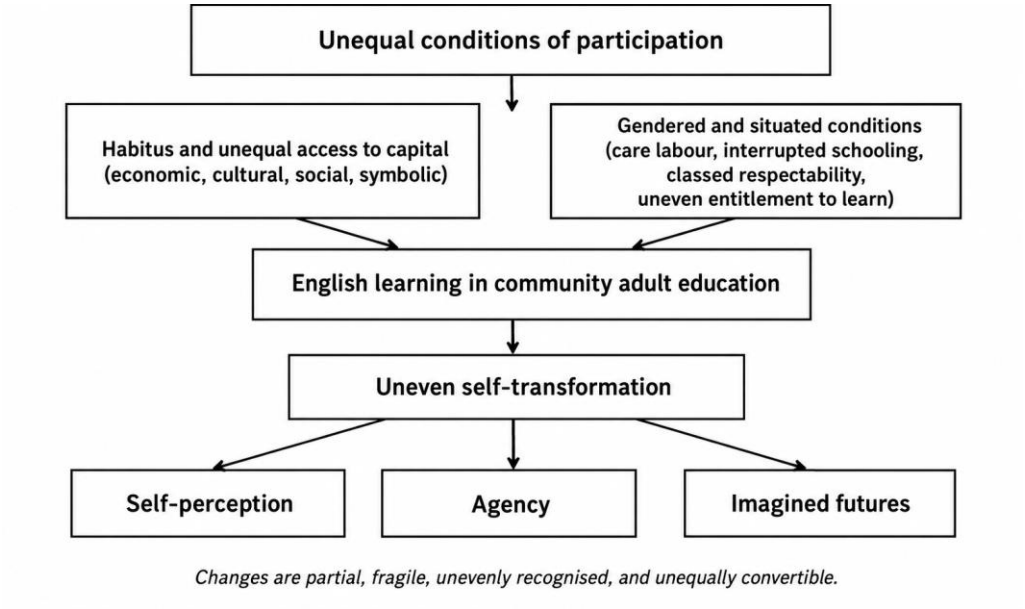


Figure 1: The Gendered Situated Transformation Framework (GSTF)

Methodology

Research Design and Setting

This study employed a life history-oriented qualitative design. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand narrated meanings, biographical trajectories, and socially situated interpretations of change rather than to measure predefined variables. A life history orientation enabled English learning to be analysed not as an isolated classroom episode, but as a practice embedded in longer trajectories of interrupted schooling, gendered obligation, precarious work, and deferred aspiration.

Fieldwork was conducted over 10 months in two community education centres in a large city in China. Both centres were publicly supported neighbourhood institutions within the local community education system. They offered low-cost or subsidised adult courses, including English, digital literacy, parenting education, practical skills, and

health-related sessions. In the local programme ecology, English occupied a visible aspirational position. It was promoted not only as useful for work and communication, but also as a means to self-improvement, family advancement, and staying connected to contemporary society.

In China, community education generally operates outside formal degree-granting pathways and is commonly organised through local community colleges, neighbourhood learning centres, and other publicly supported adult learning institutions. Participation is typically voluntary, and courses are designed to provide accessible opportunities for lifelong learning, social participation, and practical development rather than formal academic progression. This institutional positioning was important in the present sites as participants could return to organised learning without re-entering the formal school system, while English still carried strong symbolic associations with educational competence, mobility, and self-improvement. Community provision reduced some of the formal barriers to educational return without eliminating the unequal social meanings attached to who could appear competent, continuous, or successful as a learner.

The study combined three forms of data: life history interviews, classroom observations, and programme documents. Interviews formed the primary dataset. Observations and documents were used to examine how the institutional field framed English learning and organised recognisable learnerhood.

Participant Recruitment and Sample

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who met three criteria: they identified as women, they were currently enrolled in or had recently completed an English course at one of the two centres, and they occupied a locally marginal educational position. In administrative terms, participants' schooling ranged from primary school to technical or senior secondary education. In analytic terms, however, all were positioned outside dominant routes of higher educational legitimacy, having no tertiary education and limited access to academically prestigious pathways.

Initial access was facilitated through programme coordinators who distributed study invitations. To reduce selection bias, interested learners contacted the researcher directly or met the researcher independently after class, without coordinator presence. Recruitment continued to ensure variation in age, schooling history, employment precarity, caregiving responsibility, and duration of English study.

Twelve women participated in the study. The sample size was determined on the basis of interpretive depth rather than representativeness. By the later phase of analysis, no substantially new patterns emerged in relation to pathways into learning, narrated forms of change, or the conditions shaping those changes. Two participants also had employment experience in youth-oriented accommodation settings involving community-facing service work. Their work occasionally required communication with

residents or visitors from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, giving English a more immediate communicative significance than it had for most other participants. Table 1 summarises the participants' demographic, educational, employment, caregiving, and programme characteristics.

Table 1: Participant characteristics

Pseudo-nym	Age	Highest education	Employment status	Main caregiving responsibility	Time in English programme (months)	Primary reason for joining
Lin	28	Junior secondary	Retail assistant	One young child	8	To support child's future learning
Xiaomei	31	Senior secondary	Homemaker / part-time online seller	Two children	14	Self-improvement and children's education
Yulan	34	Junior secondary	Care worker	One child and elderly parent	10	Better work prospects
Fen	36	Senior secondary	Restaurant worker	Two children	6	Personal development
Aying	38	Junior secondary	Unemployed	One child	12	Re-enter learning after interruption
Meiqin	40	Technical secondary	Factory worker	Two children	18	Promotion and confidence
Shuhua	41	Junior secondary	Homemaker	Two children and household care	9	To 'not fall behind' socially
Lijuan	43	Senior secondary	Cleaner	One adolescent child	11	To improve self-worth after divorce
Qin	45	Junior secondary	Informal vendor	Adult child and family business support	7	Everyday communication and confidence
Yufang	47	Primary school	Paid caregiver	Two adult children and grandchild care	15	Long-deferred educational aspiration
Zhen	49	Junior secondary	Community helper	One adult child	20	Social participation and self-confidence
Rong	52	Primary school	Homemaker	Adult children and grandchild care	13	To learn what I missed before

Participants ranged in age from 28 to 52 years (median = 40.5), and their formal schooling ranged from primary to senior or technical secondary education. None had entered tertiary education. Employment was predominantly low paid, informal, precarious, or home-based, and all participants reported ongoing family or caregiving responsibilities, although the intensity and form of these responsibilities varied across the sample.

Data Collection

The primary dataset consisted of two rounds of in-depth semi-structured life history interviews with each participant, yielding 24 interviews. The first interview focused on childhood, family background, schooling history, work trajectory, marriage, caregiving, and pathways into English learning. The second was built on first-round memos and transcript review, and followed up on contradictions, silences, emotionally charged episodes, classroom experience, and perceived forms of change. Interviews lasted between 60 and 100 minutes, were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Coding and initial interpretation were conducted primarily from the original Chinese transcripts in order to retain participants' meanings and culturally situated expressions. Quotations selected for publication were subsequently translated into English and checked against the original Mandarin for semantic consistency, with particular attention to colloquial expressions and context-dependent meanings.

The researchers also conducted 18 non-participant classroom observations across four English classes taught by three instructors. Observation focused on teacher talk, participation patterns, public recognition, correction, peer interaction, and how good learning was made visible. Programme documents included course descriptions, flyers, posters, social media announcements, timetables, and selected handouts. These materials were analysed discursively to identify how English learning was institutionally linked to self-improvement, family responsibility, employability, and social confidence.

Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded in four stages. First, within-case narrative profiles were constructed for each participant, reconstructing educational history, work and family trajectory, entry into English learning, and key moments narrated as meaningful, difficult, interrupted, or transformative. This preserved temporal sequence and biographical coherence.

Second, cross-case open coding was conducted across interview transcripts. Recurring categories included interrupted schooling, shame, legitimacy, care burden, classroom silence, encouragement, aspiration, embarrassment, and future imagination.

Third, focused thematic coding extended across interviews, fieldnotes, and documents. The GSTF informed analysis as a set of theoretically informed sensitising concepts. Self-perception, agency, and imagined futures guided attention to the subjective, practical, and temporal dimensions of change, while habitus and forms of capital were used to interpret the conditions that enabled, constrained, and differentiated such change.

Fourth, an integrative interpretive matrix linked pathways into learning, forms of uneven self-transformation, and the conditions shaping those forms. NVivo was used for data organisation, but analytical decisions were made through repeated reading, memo-writing, code comparison, and movement between individual cases and cross-case patterns.

Positionality, Trustworthiness, and Ethics

Reflexivity was central because the researcher entered the field as a university-based academic with substantial educational privilege. Some participants initially positioned the researchers as more knowledgeable or successful, speaking in deferential ways that reflected the educational inequalities under study. Reflexive memo-writing was used throughout fieldwork and analysis. Early memos revealed a tendency to read persistence too quickly as empowerment, prompting a shift towards analysing fragility, interruption, and unequal convertibility more carefully.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through data triangulation, two-round interviews, peer debriefing, and limited member reflection. Ethical approval was obtained from the researcher's university ethics committee. All participants gave informed consent, and pseudonyms were used for all people and institutions.

Findings

Pathways into English Learning: Interrupted Schooling, Gendered Responsibility, and the Return to Learning

Participants' pathways into English learning were rooted less in immediate linguistic need than in longer biographies marked by interrupted schooling, gendered family roles, and deferred educational desire. For some women, entering the English classroom was experienced as a return to an educational space from which they had long been excluded.

Yufang, who left school after primary education, described joining the class as both exciting and uncomfortable:

> When I first sat there, I was really nervous. I kept thinking, these other people have studied more than me. I only went to primary school. But at the same time, I felt happy. It was like I had finally come back to something I missed a long time ago.

Rong framed participation in similarly retrospective terms:

> It is not that English is very useful for me now. To be honest, at my age, what can I use it for? But when I study it, I feel I am touching something I should have learned before. It is more like making up for regret.

For other participants, entry was publicly justified through family responsibility, especially motherhood. Lin initially explained:

> I joined mainly because of my child. Now the children learn so much, and if the mother knows nothing, she can only stand to one side.

Yet later, she added:

> At the beginning I said it was for my child, and that is true. But after attending for some time, I felt maybe it is also for me.

Xiaomei made a similar distinction:

> If I only say it is for the children, that is not completely true. I also liked having something that belonged to me.

A third pathway emerged through biographical rupture. Lijuan, who enrolled after divorce, said:

> Coming here was not only about English. It was like telling myself that my life had not stopped.

Aying, after years of domestic confinement, similarly said:

> When I started coming here, I felt I had a place outside the family that was still mine.

Observation and documentary data showed that the institutional field reinforced these pathways. Teachers introduced English classes as opportunities to keep learning, stay connected to society, and do something for yourself as well as the family. Promotional materials used phrases such as open a new self and learn together with your child.

Uneven Self-Transformation Through English Learning

Participants associated English learning with meaningful forms of change, but these changes were uneven rather than cumulative or uniform. They unfolded across three interrelated domains: self-perception, agency, and imagined futures.

Although analytically related, these domains were distinguished by their primary focus. Self-perception concerned how participants evaluated their own competence, worth, and legitimacy as learners, whereas agency concerned their perceived and enacted capacity to speak, persist, decide, and participate differently. Some accounts necessarily spoke to both dimensions and were interpreted according to their dominant analytical emphasis.

Reworking Self-Perception

Many participants entered the programme believing that English belonged to younger, more educated, or more capable people. Meiqin described this clearly:

> When I first came, I thought English belongs to people who studied properly.

After several months, however, she described a modest shift:

> The first time I could read a few sentences and the teacher said “Very good”, I suddenly felt maybe I am not as stupid as I thought.

Zhen’s account was more cautious:

> Before, if the teacher looked at me, I would immediately lower my head. Now I can answer sometimes.

Yet, such changes remained fragile. Fen said:

> In class, because everyone is learning together, I feel I can try. But outside, if I see English somewhere, I still feel very small.

Rong similarly insisted:

> At least I can recognise some words now. But if you ask me whether I am an educated person, no.

Observation data help explain this fragility. Teachers frequently praised visible participation with comments such as “Very good” and “Don’t be afraid”, but quicker responses and more confident speaking also became tacit measures of progress. Recognition could support confidence while still reproducing hierarchy.

Negotiating Agency

Participants also described changes in agency, especially in relation to speaking, persistence, and willingness to act in situations previously avoided. Yulan, who was observed avoiding eye contact in early sessions, later said:

> Now I still feel nervous, but sometimes I force myself to answer.

Qin framed persistence itself as action:

> Even if I say it badly, I should still continue. For me that is already a change.

For some women, this extended beyond the classroom. Lin connected English learning to involvement in her child’s education:

> Before, I would step back immediately. Now I at least dare to sit beside him and look together.

Lijuan linked class participation to a broader return to public life:

> Studying here did not completely change that, but it made me feel I could come out again a little.

However, agency remained bounded. Xiaomei captured this tension:

> Inside, I feel my thinking has become more active. But in real life, everything still depends on the children's schedule.

Meiqin expressed a similar gap between desire and possibility:

> Sometimes I think maybe if my English gets better, I could try something different at work. But then I think again—my age, my education, my job position.

Imagining Futures

A third domain of change concerned future orientation. Zhen described learning as reopening time itself:

> I am still moving forward a little, not just getting older every day.

Rong said:

> Before, I thought after a certain age, that is it. But now I feel maybe the mind can still open a bit.

Yufang framed this less as mobility than as intellectual continuation:

> I do not expect English to change my work. But when I come here, I feel my brain is not finished.

At the same time, imagined futures were accompanied by awareness of limitation. Meiqin observed:

> Thinking more also makes you see more clearly what is difficult.

Fen provided a more sceptical voice:

> I don't think this class will change my future. It just makes me feel less empty for a while.

Programme documents repeatedly linked English to confidence, modern life, and more possibilities, but participants filtered those promises through age, class, work precarity, and care obligations. Future imagination widened, but not without caution.

Conditions That Enable and Constrain Transformation

The emergence, visibility, and convertibility of transformation were shaped by unequal social conditions. Three mechanisms were especially salient: educational habitus, care-related temporal fragmentation, and unequal access to capital and recognition.

Participants did not enter English learning on neutral ground. Yufang repeatedly described herself as slow:

> If I do not understand quickly, I immediately think, yes, this is because I studied too little before.

By contrast, participants with slightly more schooling more often described struggle as situational rather than inherent. Habitus shaped not only performance, but the meaning attached to difficulty and the plausibility of change.

Care obligations fragmented study time and undermined continuity. Xiaomei said:

> I want to study seriously, but my time is broken into pieces.

Yulan added:

> Before coming here, I have already used up energy in other places.

This fragmentation affected preparation, visible participation, and public recognition. In this way, care work shaped transformation through a chain of effects rather than merely through absence from class.

Some participants had more stable schedules, supportive family members, or greater familiarity with educational routines. Others did not. A comparison between Lin and Xiaomei was especially revealing. Both initially framed participation partly through maternal responsibility, but Lin's more stable work pattern and stronger household support made it easier for her to attend consistently and build confidence from continuity. Xiaomei's study was more frequently interrupted by domestic demands, which made her gains feel more fragile despite equally strong aspiration.

Institutional recognition also mattered. Zhen recalled:

> The teacher said in front of everyone, "You improved a lot today". It stayed in my mind for many days.

Yet recognition was selective. It tended to privilege visible participation, verbal confidence, and steady attendance. Quieter or slower changes were less likely to be publicly affirmed.

Cross-case comparison further showed that unevenness did not simply separate participants who changed from those who did not. Rather, different dimensions of transformation stabilised to different degrees. Zhen, for example, developed greater confidence in public participation and appeared able to sustain this change through repeated classroom recognition. Lin similarly converted increased confidence into greater involvement in her child's learning, supported by relatively stable routines and

household support. In contrast, Fen experienced a temporary reduction in self-doubt without imagining substantial change beyond the classroom, while Xiaomei articulated strong aspiration but struggled to sustain continuity because study remained subordinate to caregiving demands. These contrasts suggest that self-perception, agency, and imagined futures were related but did not necessarily move together. Transformation was uneven between participants and within individual learning trajectories.

Taken together, the findings show that English learning was meaningful not because it produced uniform empowerment, but because it opened a socially mediated space in which participants could reinterpret themselves, act somewhat differently, and imagine altered futures. Those changes, however, remained uneven in their emergence, visibility, and convertibility.

Discussion

Pathways into English Learning as Constrained Educational Re-entry

The first research question asked how participants narrated their pathways into English learning. The findings suggest that these pathways are better understood as forms of constrained educational re-entry than as straightforward matters of motivation or human-capital calculation. Research on investment has already shown that language learning is tied to identity, power, and desired futures rather than to motivation alone (Darvin and Norton 2015; Norton 2013). The present study extends that argument by showing that for women with limited formal schooling in community adult education, investment in English was also investment in re-entering educational legitimacy after interruption and exclusion.

This finding complicates recent work on adults with limited formal schooling in second-chance education. Studies of second-chance participation have shown that adults with limited formal schooling often carry stigma, ambivalence, and the afterlife of school failure into later learning (Mertens et al. 2025; Raoufi-Kvist 2025). The present study adds a more gendered and socially situated point: women's entry into English learning was often mediated through morally acceptable narratives of maternal duty, family advancement, and self-improvement. Participation was not simply a matter of choosing to learn; it was one of the social forms through which constraint was negotiated.

This interpretation sharpens how community adult education should be understood. Recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of adult learning for community capability, local participation, and social development (Foley and Ollis 2024; Grotlüschen 2024). The present findings add a critical qualification. Community adult English education does not simply offer access to learning. It helps shape the moral and institutional terms on which educational return becomes intelligible. By framing English through self-improvement, family responsibility, and social participation, programmes produce the conditions under which women can justify returning to education at all.

Uneven Self-Transformation Beyond Linear Empowerment

The second research question asked what forms of uneven self-transformation participants associated with English learning. The findings confirm a central insight of transformative learning theory: Adult learning can reshape self-understanding, action, and future orientation (Mezirow 1991, 2000). The findings also show that change did not unfold as a coherent sequence. It was partial, domain specific, and sometimes contradictory. This pattern supports critiques of transformative learning for under-specifying inequality (Brookfield 2000; Taylor 2007), but it also goes further. In this study, inequality was not something that later constrained transformation. It was constitutive of the form transformation took.

The three dimensions of uneven self-transformation were therefore related without forming a linear sequence. A changed self-perception could make participation more thinkable, but did not necessarily produce wider agency; increased agency in the classroom could coexist with restricted action in work or family life; and expanded imagined futures could remain aspirational when learners lacked the time, capital, or institutional recognition needed to pursue them. The significance of the GSTF lies precisely in explaining these disjunctions. Transformation can be real in one domain while remaining blocked, unstable, or weakly convertible in another. This also helps explain why the more sustained trajectories of Zhen and Lin should not be treated as a separate category of successful learner; their changes were more durable in some respects, but they remained situated within the same unequal field.

This is why the article takes a critical stance towards empowerment discourse. Empowerment remains politically valuable, but analytically it is too smooth for the phenomenon observed here. It can over-read temporary confidence, local recognition, or classroom participation as evidence of broader enhancement. Recent scholarship on women's learning and development continues to stress gendered barriers and uneven opportunities (Baumgartner and Shang 2025; Kroese 2025), while recent language learning research with women in disadvantaged contexts highlights how complexity, fragility, and prior exclusion are often underestimated. For this reason, uneven self-transformation is proposed as a more accurate analytic for meaningful change that remains fragile, reversible, and unequally convertible.

English itself also requires a critical reading. In this study, English was not only an aspirational resource; it was also a hierarchy-producing one. Recent TESOL work on language ideologies, critical feminist pedagogy, and decolonising English reinforces this point by showing that English can simultaneously promise opportunity and reproduce unequal norms of value (Baker et al. 2025; Bergström, Jonsson, and Shaswar 2025; Granger and Gerlach 2024; Sah and Fang 2025). English functions as both a medium of possibility and a site of exposure.

Gendered Habitus, Care Work, and Unequal Convertibility

The third research question asked how transformative possibilities were enabled, constrained, and differentiated. The findings indicate that the decisive issue is not simply whether learning generates change, but whether change can be sustained, recognised, and converted beyond the classroom. Bourdieu's account of habitus and capital remains indispensable here (Bourdieu 1977, 1986). The study extends that reading in one important respect: Habitus shaped not only what learners could do, but also what forms of change they could plausibly perceive and claim. It organised the horizon of recognisable transformation itself. At the same time, habitus was not uniformly constraining. Earlier experiences of persistence, adaptation, and coping with hardship could also provide dispositions that made some forms of learning-related change more sustainable. For participants such as Zhen and Lin, classroom recognition appeared to resonate with existing dispositions towards persistence, allowing small gains to be interpreted as evidence that continued participation was possible. Habitus operated as a differentiated and potentially contradictory set of dispositions rather than as a fixed barrier to transformation.

Care work was central to this process. Recent work on women's learning continues to show that gendered responsibilities constrain participation, but the present study identified temporal fragmentation as a key mechanism. Recent evidence also shows that family responsibilities restrict women's participation in adult education more strongly than men's, demonstrating that care is embedded in gendered distributions of time and institutional opportunity (Pöyliö and McMullin 2025). Feminist work on mature learners further challenges the tendency to treat unpaid care as external to education, showing how domestic and caring labour enters the very conditions under which learning can be undertaken and recognised (Welsh 2024). Care obligations did not merely reduce attendance. They fragmented study time, weakened preparation, limited visible participation, and reduced opportunities for public recognition. Care should be understood not simply as a shortage of available hours, but as a gendered organisation of time. Participants' study time was repeatedly interruptible and conditional on the needs of children, older relatives, and household routines. This reduced not only the quantity of time available for learning, but also its continuity, predictability, and legitimacy within everyday family life. This matters because recognition was itself part of how transformation became more or less sustainable. Learners who could prepare more consistently and demonstrate confidence more visibly were more likely to receive institutional affirmation and stabilise small gains into more durable legitimacy.

This finding sharpens the critique of community adult education as a field of equality. Such programmes were not only supportive fields; they were also selective fields of recognition. Visible confidence, verbal participation, and continuity were more readily legible as progress than quieter or slower forms of change. Inclusionary spaces could still reproduce differentiated norms of what counts as a successful learner and what counts as worthwhile transformation.

Rethinking Equality in Community Adult English Education: The Contribution of the GSTF

Taken together, the findings clarify the distinct contribution of the GSTF. The framework shows that transformation in community adult English learning is not an outcome unevenly distributed after participation; it is a socially differentiated process constituted through unequal conditions of participation from the outset. This is its theoretical increment. Transformative learning explains why meaning may change. Bourdieu explains why participation and conversion are unequal. Investment theory explains why language learning is tied to identity and power. The GSTF explains something more specific: how meaning, aspiration, agency, recognition, and inequality are co-produced in the very process through which marginalised adult learners engage English learning.

The study also advances debates on educational equality. Equality in community adult education cannot be reduced to access and attendance. Enrolment equality does not secure recognitional equality, participation equality does not secure temporal equality, and learning opportunity does not secure convertibility equality. This is the article's strongest critique of opportunity discourse. Community adult English programmes may widen participation while still reproducing differentiated pathways of legitimacy, visibility, and future possibility. More socially just provision requires care-sensitive design, broader recognitional practices, and pedagogic definitions of progress that include reduced shame, renewed legitimacy, and reopened future imagination.

Conclusion

This article has argued that English learning in community adult education should be understood not as a uniform route to empowerment, but as a socially differentiated process of uneven self-transformation. For the women with limited formal schooling in this study, entering English learning was a form of constrained educational re-entry shaped by interrupted schooling, gendered obligation, and deferred aspiration. The changes they associated with learning were meaningful, yet partial: Self-perception could shift without secure legitimacy, agency could expand in limited domains, and future imagination could widen without becoming readily actionable.

The study's main theoretical contribution shows that transformation is not an outcome distributed unevenly after participation; it is constituted through unequal conditions of participation from the outset. This is the distinctive value of the GSTF. Rather than treating meaning-making, inequality, and recognition as separate analytic layers, the framework explains how they are co-produced in the process of learning itself. In this respect, uneven self-transformation offers a more precise analytic than empowerment for understanding educational change that is real, but fragile, reversible, and unequally convertible.

The article also advances debates on educational equality. It suggests that access to learning does not guarantee equality in recognition, time, or convertibility. Community adult English programmes may widen participation while still privileging learners who are better able to display continuity, confidence, and visible progress. Equality cannot be assessed only through enrolment or attendance; it must also be assessed through the conditions under which change becomes possible, legible, and sustainable.

The practical implication is not simply that programmes should be more supportive, but that they should rethink what counts as progress. Progress should not be recognised only through steady attendance, test performance, verbal participation, or performative confidence. Teachers could also attend to quieter indicators of change, such as returning after interrupted attendance, attempting English despite embarrassment, asking a peer for assistance, completing learning tasks under fragmented schedules, or expressing reduced shame about earlier educational failure. Programmes could further support learners with substantial care responsibilities through flexible attendance arrangements, catch-up materials, peer support, and low-stakes forms of assessment that do not equate interrupted participation with weak commitment. Teacher development could explicitly address how recognition is distributed in the classroom so that slower, less visible progress is not overshadowed by fluent or confident performance. These measures would broaden the recognitional field without lowering expectations for learning. They may also be relevant in community-facing service settings, where greater communicative confidence can support everyday interaction with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, although language learning alone cannot be a substitute for wider institutional support for inclusive communication.

This study is interpretive and context-bound. First, it was conducted in two urban community education centres in China, and the institutional conditions surrounding community adult learning may differ across national, regional, and policy contexts. Second, the participants were learners who had remained engaged with their programmes long enough to participate in the study; women who withdrew early or discontinued learning may narrate transformation, constraint, and recognition differently. Third, although the life history design reconstructed change across participants' biographies, the study did not include long-term follow-up after programme participation and it cannot establish the durability of reported changes. Future research could examine the analytical transferability of the GSTF across rural and urban settings, other adult learning domains, and more diverse learner groups. Longitudinal studies following both continuing and discontinuing learners would be especially valuable for examining when fragile changes become more durable, when they recede, and under what conditions they become convertible into wider forms of participation or opportunity.

The significance of English learning in community adult education lies not in any guaranteed promise of mobility or empowerment, but in the unequal conditions under which learners can re-enter education, claim legitimacy, and sustain change. Its

significance may also extend to broader forms of communicative participation in increasingly diverse urban communities, particularly where everyday service and community interactions cross linguistic and cultural boundaries. Community adult education does not simply compensate for inequality; it may also reorganise inequality through differential recognition of whose transformation counts.

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