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**Toward an English-Speaking Community: Chinese Students' Responses  
to Perceived Progress in a University EAP Program**

by

Chad Kuehn

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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English: Teaching English as a Second Language

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### **Abstract**

The EAP (English for Academic Purposes) program is a contingent of courses intended to orient international students to academic endeavors in the United States, and to bring their English skill to a level at which they can successfully complete university-level work. Students generally complete Listening and Speaking, Reading and Writing, Cultural Orientation, and Administrative Orientation courses. The former two work specifically on language skill, and the latter two focus on cultural and practical matters as well.

This study aimed to determine if international Chinese students invested or resisted in EAP courses at their university due to their perceived progress toward an English-speaking imagined community. As students may engage in a class more if they find it is moving them toward their imagined future selves, it was hypothesized that students in such a course would exhibit behaviors of investment, and that students in a less fulfilling course would exhibit behaviors of resistance. Through one-on-one interviews with seven international Chinese students who have recently been in the university's EAP program, it was shown that while behaviors of investment and resistance do occur, the impetus for such behaviors rests more on factors such as the classroom population or cultural mores of respect. Informants did not view failure in the EAP as a possibility, appeared secure in the achievement of their future goals, and generally quite comfortable in their current identity as international Chinese students - positioning an English-speaking community as somewhat of an afterthought, and a less motivating factor than those listed above. Thus, EAP courses were generally regarded as a necessary step to undertake, rather than an opportunity to progress toward an English-speaking imagined community.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

### Statement of Problem

As language students go abroad to study and encounter the culture that accompanies a language, they begin to question the identity that has always been second nature to them. They may feel excited to take on aspects of the new culture or to become wholly a part of it. They may feel conflicted or traitorous about any shift away from their lifelong sense of identity - and they may not have the words to verbalize the complex experiences they are having.

This period of time will be a challenging one as students work to consolidate an individual identity from the past, one from the present, and one they are aiming for in the future. Since “identity is fundamentally temporal” (Wenger, 1999, p. 154), these identities are unlikely to be the same and will force the student to make changes and compromises. Any of the feelings the student encounters during this process may manifest itself as a behavior in the classroom.

Past studies have focused on various factors that may influence a student’s reactions in the language classroom. These include factors such as the new country of residence’s culture (Archakis and Tsakona, 2016), influences of the student’s imagined community (Norton and Toohey, 2011), a student’s expectations of their inbound trajectory toward a community (Wenger, 1999), or perceptions of the classroom, its practices, and dogma (Canagarajah 1993, 2004). Each of these factors will contribute to the many internal and external stimuli in the negotiation of a student’s identity during such a process of adjustment.

This study includes consideration of the perspective of Critical Pedagogy - critical theory applied to education - as students’ reactions may at times be caused by factors linked to social justice. Giroux (1983, p. 8) defines critical theory as “the nature of self-conscious critique

and...the need to develop a discourse of social transformation and emancipation that does not cling dogmatically to its own doctrinal assumptions.” But, as Wenger (1999) notes, ideally the symbiosis of the student and the institution is an orchestration. We should not automatically pit one against the other. He promotes discarding the assumption that “one is good and the other bad, one a source of problems and the other a source of solutions” (p. 147). It is in this equitable light that this study hopes to highlight where the institution (as represented by the instructor, and their instructional methods), and the learner can partner with one another to achieve augmented language skill for the student. While teachers and students are separate entities, there is no doubt that this symbiosis can exist between the two.

It is the hope of this research to explore student feelings and reactions and to encourage instructors to give more than a cursory glance at the question, “What do you want to do with your English?” Teachers may, after all, have different goals for their students than those the students hold in their own minds, and teachers may also be completely unaware of such student goals. By better understanding their feelings and reactions themselves, students can become more fully engaged and purposeful agents of action with the language skills they are acquiring. By illuminating the classroom practices that elicit reactions of investment or resistance from them, students may be better prepared to understand their own reactions, and articulate their needs to their instructors.

Another aim of the study is to pinpoint instances that students felt compelled to invest further in their EAP studies, or to resist and withdraw further from them - and to capitalize on this information by analyzing which factors are under the instructor’s control in creating a classroom that encourages the former and discourages the latter - to create thoughtful action on



part of instructors as well as students. The study hopes that instructors will better recognize the challenge of negotiating identity for language learners - and that any themes between student perception of progress toward an imagined community and instructor action that emerge during the process of this project will enable all educators to do so.

As noted by Tinkler and Tinkler (2016, p. 197) in regard to cultural humility, “It takes humility to listen carefully and to value interests, and the data showed how much sharing resonated across their [student participants’] experience.” This study hopes to take a moment to hear, understand, and give voice to the motivations behind student reactions to the classroom practices they likely have little control over, and to ensure that instructors are working to understand, address, and negotiate those expectations.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

### Identity

The learning of an additional language is more than just acquiring its syntax or lexicon when learning takes place in an area where the target language (TL) is widely spoken and serves as the cultural currency. In such a case, who the learner actually is comes into question, both internally and externally. Language students must navigate who they are, why they are choosing to take on this new language, and how the two intersect. Norton and Toohey (2011, p. 414) note that earlier SLA research cast learners to either end of a dichotomy (i.e. motivated/unmotivated, introverted/extroverted), but that modern researchers look at learners along a continuum: “identity theorists see these affective descriptors as constructed in frequently inequitable social contexts, as variable over time and space, and sometimes co-existing in contradictory ways within a single individual.” In light of these “contradictory ways,” we understand the potential for struggle, confusion, or chaos when defining one’s self in a new culture, while taking on its language.

Bigelow (2011) lists several contributing factors that may play into an individual’s formation of identity: “internal tensions among members of an ethnic group, along with youth culture, pressures from institutions, societal norms, and prior migration history.” Here we see that pressures certainly do exist outside of the student’s support group, but that pressures to fit into a specific identity also exist within their own social group. A student’s struggle to construct identity may be complicated by the expectations of those closest to them.

Describing an experience from the Somali population, Hayow (2018, p. 29) relates, “Somali immigrants are often misunderstood being that they are phenotypically black: society

tends to lump them as being from the African American racial category, without realizing heritage, ethnic background or culture.” This experience underscores how sudden and drastic a change can take place concerning one’s identity. In the course of a day, or days, immigration can completely change how one is viewed from one society to another. In the case of Chinese students arriving in the United States, the students must suddenly absorb, and integrate into, their new identities. They are no longer seen as “Chinese” among Chinese, but now, they may be seen by many Americans as generically “Asian.”

Canagarajah (2004) points out that we no longer assume identities in relation to language learning to be “static, unitary, discrete, and given.” Rather, “in order to find coherence and empowerment, the subject has to negotiate...competing identities and subject positions.” Identities are “reconstructed and reconstituted in relation to the changing discursive and material contexts” (p. 117). Students are undergoing a process that is influenced by myriad factors: their own history, their new classroom, the language they are studying, its culture, old and new friends, family - the list goes on and can be exhausting to the student.

### **Shifting English Language Learner Identities**

Students must somehow make a shift in identity to truly engage in their own process of growth and to become a member of their imagined community. Indeed, Wenger (1999) posits that this negotiation is integral. “The work of reconciliation may be the most significant challenge faced by learners who move from one community of practice to another...the maintenance of an identity across boundaries requires work and...is not just a secondary process...it is at the core of what it means to be a person. Multimembership and the work of reconciliation are intrinsic to the very concept of identity” (pp. 160-161). He notes several areas

where negotiability gives one leverage: to make meanings applicable to new circumstances, to enlist the collaboration of others, to make sense of events, or to assert our membership” (Wenger, 1999, p. 197). The shift in identity is not a passive process, it is an active opportunity for students to engage with the world as they see fit.

Students are not only being caught up in this internal struggle - relegated to simply surviving the challenges that beset them as they take on a new identity - they have autonomy. Liu and Tannacito (2013, p. 359), view students “as active agents who are capable of negotiation, departing from the narrow way of treating these students as passive and problematic.” They point to studies such as Canagarajah (1993), and Norton (2001) that have begun revealing how students are capable of negotiating their own identity, rather than simply taking on any dominant or institutionally-ordained identity given to them. For instance, Canagarajah (1993, p. 601) discusses that students in his study are willing only to look at English through a lens of grammar, learning what is necessary to pass exams, but unwilling to engage in the cultural aspects of the language lessons that might contribute to the undermining of their local culture. Liu and Tannacito’s study featured two students whose “ideology-infused resistance shaped their agency and led to successful participation in their imagined communities of prestige” (2013, p. 369). While external forces are working to further an opposing agenda, students are autonomously rejecting that agenda and engaging per the rules of their own identity negotiation.

Shen (1989, p. 461) sums up her negotiation during her experience learning to write for an English-language audience, “The old ‘I’ used to embody only one set of values, but now it had to embody multiple sets of values. To be truly ‘myself,’ which I knew was key to my success in learning English composition, meant *not to be my Chinese self at all.*” Adjusting to the new

systems of a language may not just mean adapting one's original identity to suit the task, it may mean the complex task of creating an entirely new identity in order to succeed within the given framework. While this may sound oppressive, in Shen's case, she appreciated the shift, "I welcome the change, for it has added a new dimension to me and to my view of the world" (1989, p. 465). Shen's experience demonstrated the correlation found between "intrinsic interest...and productive and additive changes" discussed by Yihong, Yuan, Ying, and Yan (2007, p. 148). Motivation to learn about the target language and culture, and positive changes in identity, cycle and build off one another in such a case.

### **Trajectories**

Language students, especially those who have taken on international study, have set themselves on a certain path. They are engaging with the new language (L2) and their study in a unique way. Wenger (1999) delineates several trajectories one may be on in relation to a community of practice (that community here being English speakers and users). He sees a trajectory as "a path ...that has a momentum of its own in addition to a field of influences." We will focus on the trajectory that students most likely consider themselves to be on, the inbound trajectory. The inbound trajectory houses newcomers to a community of practice. Students' "identities are invested in their future participation, even though their present participation may be peripheral" (p. 154). Students and their families have invested a great deal of time, money, and energy into their academic endeavors, and they hold expectations of a payoff for their work. While they may still feel like outsiders now, they have hopes to become insiders of their ideal community.

Paradigmatic trajectories provide students with models of success (Wenger, 1999, p. 156). These trajectories offer role models for students as they work toward full participation in a community. By aspiring to the success of the people and stories embodied by these paradigmatic trajectories, students gain hope and are provided a map leading to the community of which they hope to become part. Paradigmatic trajectories provide students with a means of “sorting out what matters and what does not, what contributes to...identity and what remains marginal” (Wenger, 1999, p. 155). That is to say, students will come to us with ideas of who they are, who they want to be, what they are willing to do, what they value as practice, and what they deem necessary to progress forward into a new community. While this may be laid out in the students’ minds, as we have seen, this shift is hardly a simple step to take.

Cooks (2009) conducted research concerning “how learning settings provide resources for the development of the practice-linked identities of participants” (p. 41). In interacting with and observing practiced and novice track members on a high school team, he found three identity resources that affected the trajectory of the athletes: material, relational and ideation resources. The students needed to learn how to use, and have access to, the materials that would make them a “track member.” They needed relationships with the coaches that would encourage the coaches to believe in them, give them access to limited material resources, and make them feel part of the track team. They also needed the coaches’ positive impressions of them as promising potential track members that would serve as impetus for the coaches to help the students create in their own minds an ideology of being a track member.

Without access to the three types of resources, Cooks found that students were in danger of remaining on a peripheral trajectory - such as Carla and Gozi, who were not offered relational

or ideation resources, and existed in limbo with the group (pp. 55-57). The head coach spent little time with these athletes socializing or providing feedback, did not create in them a sense of being a track member (such as a hurdler, or long jumper, or runner), and did not encourage their social integration into the team.

Instructors have a great deal of influence over how students may view themselves, and which trajectory they may find themselves on. Educators must provide students the material resources that will enable them to become speakers of a language - in this case abstract tools like vocabulary, grammar, or dictionary skills, as well as physical resources like the dictionary itself. Relational resources must exist between teachers and students, but also between members of the classroom and members of the community that will encourage and support the students' growth. This is doubly important within language learning as the most vibrant language occurs in communities, not in solitude. Ideation resources like feedback and increasingly responsible roles requiring language negotiation, will allow students to think of themselves as capable and growing speakers. Each of these resource types will keep students on an inbound trajectory, and move them forward on it. Offering or refusing these resources is well within the reach of instructors - as is influencing the trajectory and self-image of our students.

### **Hegemony of English**

As alluded to, there are powers surrounding English learning that may not have a student's best interests in mind - hence the negotiation of identity on a student's own terms. Giroux (1983) puts forward that institutions and the cultures in which they find themselves "are governed by complex ideological properties that often generate contradictions both within and between them" (p. 102). Canagarajah (1993, p. 602) notes Giroux's criticism of the tendency of

such institutions and their reproductive perspectives of schooling to inculcate only the culture, ideologies, and social relations necessary to build and sustain the status quo.

Although students may have little to no use for English in their current or future lives, English is often a requirement of academic progress and social advancement. Students will feel pressures from parents, schools, and society as a whole to learn English to “measure up.” Lin (1996) takes a close look at the influence of English in Hong Kong in the recent past, and finds that while English is the language of the minority, it is also the language of power and of social and economic advancement. Students “must have adequate English resources” to enter many professional training programs like medicine or legal studies (programs accredited by the British); English is by and large the medium of instruction at universities in Hong Kong; there are English language requirements to join Hong Kong’s civil service; and English instruction was offered to the affluent up to 1949, whereas only Chinese instruction was offered to the less well-to-do in the same time period (pp. 53-56). Lin goes on to delineate how foreign business interests are the main driving force, and justification for, “subordinating all educational goals to the dominant goal of mastering a foreign language” (p. 58), and that the existence of English-medium higher education tends to keep “valuable foreign knowledge and expertise ‘unindigenised,’” and beyond the reach of the majority of the population (p. 60).

Saxena (2009, p. 170) reports another iteration of this power play that occurs the world over. He notes that while English is positioned as “other” in Brunei - as it can be seen as a threat to Malay and to the Malay Islam practiced in Brunei - “such forces are countered fiercely by the English-educated elite in the country.” It’s easy to imagine the frustration of students who must participate in the study of a language that is used to stratify and dominate as illustrated in these



examples, especially if they recognize that their social standing will all but guarantee that their journey with English will only go so far.

Liu and Tannacito (2013, pp. 355-356) warn that “If the first language and culture become devalued while gaining social and symbolic capital in learning the L2, the danger is that learning to write in English as a second language can reproduce the inequality that characterizes the language and cultural globalization of English.” Students may become overly invested in the idea of their imagined community and its value to the detriment of their own actual community and its attributes. For instance, Chen (2006) noted several narratives of America or the West that Taiwanese students valued highly: it being “cool” to communicate with white individuals, a higher level of English proficiency being the ticket to a better job, higher social status, and personal pride. This relates to Liu and Tannacito’s (2013, p. 357) concept of White Prestige Ideology: “We highlight how White Prestige Ideology, which we define as racialized ideology that fantasizes whiteness, intertwined with other ideologies influences students’ literacy practices. We coined the term WPI because it focuses on the importance of racial and not just linguistic ideas in the purported superiority of NESs [native English speakers].” There is a culture of the superiority of English that has been perpetrated around the globe to which students remain susceptible and at times, unaware. “English in Taiwan is usually perceived as a means of raising social status and identity and empowering the self, rather than as the tongue of the oppressor” (Liu & Tannacito, 2013, p. 357). Pennycook (1999) notes the importance of drawing this curtain back with students, warning against a “top-down attempt” of “preacherly modernist-emancipatory pedagogy” that may come across as, or actually be, “pessimistic and patronizing” (p. 336).

Castells discusses the dominant power's ability to create legitimizing identities, identities that "are introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their dominance" (1997, p. 8). In creating these identities, dominant cultures define appropriate and inappropriate modes of being for the subordinate cultures in the presence of the dominant culture. Archakis and Tsakona (2016, p. 13) note that students in their study "adopt the majority perspective [the legitimizing identity] and hence appear to gradually accept the conditions and values of their new place of residence," though they add, "Only later on are the initial acceptance and consent mitigated and partly revoked by expressions resisting the total acceptance of majority norms." While students may initially accept and even find comfort in, having a "role" in their new society, they often later realize that this assigned role is unfair and unsatisfactory.

Even when students come to this realization, they may have little power to shift fortunes in their favor. Pennycook (1999) encourages educators to work toward transformative pedagogy, asking of themselves how they hope to change things with their particular approach to education (p. 331). Fully engaged in the system and having more complete understanding and more means to change structures of power than do students, educators are otherwise perpetrators of the status quo. He encourages those leading classrooms and schools to recognize "an intricate patterning of power relationships involving language, gender, sexuality, race, class, ethnicity, popular culture, education, immigration, teaching practices, curriculum development, and other concerns" (p. 333). While we will recognize certain realities with chagrin, he posits it is important that we also recognize that change is possible and that we find "vision both of what a preferable state of affairs might be and how one might start to work towards it" (p. 335). Pennycook encourages educators to not only empower the marginalized, but to work to change the entire system (p. 337)

- transformative pedagogy. This is clearly a tall order, but he suggests such work can include, among other things, allowing students control over the curriculum, not focusing only on inclusivity but creating real discussion of social issues within the classroom, and by considering “our work...at the very heart of some of the most crucial educational, cultural, and political issues of our time” (pp. 336-346).

### **Imagined Communities and Imagined Identities**

While some students may only be obligated to study English, many students have come to or continued in the study of English by choice. This “choice” does not happen of its own accord. Oftentimes, throughout their lives students have had positive experiences with English, heard caregivers and teachers talk admirably about English, and have seen entreating depictions of English-speaking people and lands on television. They have a concept of what it means to speak English and to be an English speaker, and there is a desire to be part of that concept.

“There is a focus on the future when learners imagine who they might be, and who their communities might be, when they learn a language” (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 422). Students are not only navigating who they currently are in relation to a target language and its skills, they are also wrapped up in the chase after who that language - they imagine - will allow them to be; this is a reality that may or may not eventually be achieved, for various reasons.

Liu and Tannacito’s (2013, p. 355) warning is relevant here as well. “If the first language and culture become devalued while gaining social and symbolic capital in learning the L2, the danger is that learning to write in English as a second language can reproduce the inequality that characterizes the language and cultural globalization of English.” Language students are working

to satisfy internal and external pressures, to modify or create identities, but also to become a part of an imagined community without devaluing their own L1 (native language) culture.

In some cases students may not feel sufficiently empowered to reach for acceptance in the imagined community; their involvement with the community may be imagined only as appeasement. Archakis and Tsakona (2016, p. 11) found that some immigrants, as noted above, “adopt the identities proposed or assigned to them by dominant discourses and institutions, so as to gradually become ‘legitimate’ members of the host community...” This highlights another danger in the construction of identity while learning a new language. If the imagined community or actual community is not satisfactorily welcoming, the language learner may always understand themselves as a second-class citizen. A student may always label themselves as a “non-native speaker,” no matter how skilled they become at speaking English, they may always defer to the “actual” citizens of a country, or to those who speak the language “natively,” if the student’s acceptance into their imagined community is never realized.

### **Social and Cultural Capital**

Coleman (1990) defines social capital as intangible social resources based on social relationships that one can draw upon to facilitate action and to achieve goals, as “a variety of different entities having two characteristics in common: They all consist of some aspect of a social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure” (p. 302). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) define its counterpart, cultural capital, as consisting of investment in a set of symbols and meanings reproduced by the dominant class of a society and passed down, or reproduced, through generations. Both social and cultural capital are important

for the student to understand, and to gain, but educators must facilitate students striking a balance that ensures students don't come to value the dominant culture over their own.

Lightbown and Spada (2017, p. 33) define additive bilingualism as “the maintenance of the home language while the second language is being learned.” This is already support for the student and their native social and cultural capital. Simply recognizing and valuing the first or native language demarginalizes the student and their culture. Another step beyond additive bilingualism, Yihong, Ying, Yuan, and Yan (2005) describe productive bilingualism wherein “the command of the target language and that of the native language positively reinforce each other; deeper understanding and appreciation of the target culture goes hand in hand with deeper appreciation of the native culture.” They go on to call productive bilingualism “an ideal type of bilingualism,” and symbolize it as an equation:  $1 + 1 = > 2$  (p. 40). Their research supports what humanity tells us, everyone deserves the chance to be valued for who they are and where they come from, everyone has a story to tell, and abilities to contribute.

Norton and Toohey (2011, p. 417) note that “pedagogical practices have the potential to be transformative in offering language learners more powerful positions than those they may occupy either inside or outside the classroom...It is through language that a learner gains access to, or is denied access to, powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak.” Depending upon the views and practices of the classroom teacher, students can gain social capital as they continue along their inbound trajectory. In fact, this increase in social capital defines their inbound trajectory, and it, along with cultural capital, will likely be incentivizing in relation to students' level of investment. To further incentivize students, respect for student L1s and cultures can be maintained.

## **Student Resistance**

There are times when students may become overwhelmed by aspects of the dominance of English and Western culture. There may be times they do not see progress toward their imagined community - times they see a gain in Western social and cultural capital only in light of a loss of the social and cultural capital of their home culture. In short, there may be times that the process of negotiating their identity is overwhelming. In these instances, acts of resistance on part of the student might be expected. Acts of resistance might include students focusing on aspects of their immigrant experience or missing home (Archakis & Tsakona, 2016, pp. 6, 17); subversive glosses and drawings in textbooks, refusing the instructor's choice of teaching method, avoiding use of English in class (Canagarajah, 1993, pp. 612, 615-616); presenting the teacher only with an "institutionally desired" (Canagarajah, 2004, p. 120) version of the student's self; extreme disillusionment and anger (Kinger, 2004, p. 234); tardiness, ignoring assignment standards, avoiding teacher input (Liu & Tannacito, 2013, pp. 367, 368); non-participation, code-switching, officially leaving the class (Norton, 2001, pp. 159, 164, 165); leaving materials home, not completing homework, talking in class, or focusing on off-task activities (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 434).

A notable act of "resistance" is that of creating "safe houses." Canagarajah describes his notion of safe houses as "a safe way of adopting alternate identities without being penalized for (what is perceived as) deviant behavior," as "hidden spaces in the classroom that provide a safe site for students to negotiate identities more critically" (p. 120). Considering Canagarajah's notion, we see that "resistance" is dependent upon who is judging the act and interpreting its intent. For the sake of this study, ramifications of critical pedagogy will be included as

discussion, but acts of resistance during the research will be defined as actions uncondoned by the instructor.

Students don't commit acts of resistance simply to aggravate their instructors. As we've seen, they can be caused by a student's struggle to negotiate their identity and engage with a new language and culture. These acts of resistance provide certain benefits to a student. Norton (2001, pp. 164-165) notes that an act of resistance such as non-participation may be enacted to preserve a student's imagined community. If a student is unsupported in who they believe they are or in who they believe they are going to be, they may withdraw to avoid further attack on their concepts of identity. Norton and Toohey (2011) offer an example of students who remain silent and invest in written activities and argue that these students may be actively resisting oral practices in which they would have been positioned unequally with local English speakers (p. 421) - in doing so, they are able to avoid a subordinate position. Canagarajah (2004, p. 122) adds that acts of resistance can allow students to "retain their dignity and develop hidden ideologies that explain the injustice of the situation and work out spiritual alternatives that give them hope." He also asserts that safe houses help "keep alive a vision of the possibilities," that "imagined communities can, in fact, be very functional as they develop the roles, discourses, and values that counter the dominant institutions and prepare the oppressed to adopt these when the time is ready for change" (p. 134).

### **Student Investment**

All of this is not to say that students must necessarily have an adversarial relationship with English or with their instructors. It is part of the charge of an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) educator to mitigate feelings of hostility and inhibitions toward learning

English. Educators must recognize the positioning of the student and strive to encourage their investment.

Norton and Toohey (2011) define investment as a separate concept from motivation. They mark motivation as “psychological” and investment as “sociological.” They argue that “investment recognizes that learners often have variable desires to engage in the range of social interactions and community practices in which they are situated.” “Investment,” they add, “sees language learners as having complex identities, which change across time and space, and which are constructed on the basis of the socially given, and the individually struggled-for” (p. 420). So, while a student may be very motivated to learn English, social interactions or community practices surrounding their learning may keep them from investing in that learning. The student motivated to learn English is unlikely to invest in the course where the instructor does not value student L1s or speaks disparagingly of the students’ home countries.

As an example of investment, Liu and Tannacito (2013) tell the story of Monica, a Taiwanese woman who feels superior to other Taiwanese due to her study of English. Her friends see her as a fluent speaker as she studied in the U.S., they see Monica as having cultural capital and have bought into White Prestige Ideology. Monica desires to build her social status and sees English as social capital. These views all strengthened Monica’s investment considerably (p. 366).

Conversely, Norton (2001) relates Katarina’s story. In Poland, Katarina had been a respected teacher, a professional. Katarina’s imagined community in Canada, to which she’d immigrated, was a community of professionals. Katarina’s ESL teacher, a member of that professional community, positioned Katarina outside of the community, despite Katarina’s



professional history. Although Katarina was motivated to learn English - due to this slight and the threat to her imagined community - she was unable to invest in the course and actually left it altogether (p. 164). Norton (2001) continues her thoughts on investment stating that “learners will expect or hope to have a good return on their investment in the target language - a return that will give them access to the privileges of target language speakers” (p. 166). In the case of Monica above, Monica was able to find that return, whereas Katarina, in her own story, was not.

Catalysts of investment might include instructors focusing on grammar and vocabulary practice that enables a student’s ability to write quickly, instructor focus on English practice rather than critical thinking or heuristics, lessons on specifically academic skills like source selection (Leki & Carson, 1994, pp. 89, 91-92); classroom reality that coincides with students’ imagined communities, and trajectories toward them (Liu & Tannacito, 2013, p. 362); or, generally, Norton’s “return on their investment in the target language...that will give them access to the privileges of target language speakers” (2001, p. 166).

## **In Conclusion**

Naturally, educators want to be aware of as many sides of a story as possible. Being informed, providing the best information to students, and avoiding bias are only a few reasons for this awareness. Thus, we have tried to look at the topic of language acquisition and identity through several lenses. Clearly, we want our students to have a positive experience learning English and in building an identity that includes native culture and values. As we have explored above, complications exist that might impede an immaculate journey toward this goal. Our job as educators and our infinite sojourn toward awareness include minimizing these complications. Yihong, et al. (2005) provide us with an encouraging take on language and identity. Let us focus

our efforts on achieving their study's productive bilingualism, "1 + 1 = > 2," which they found to be "quite common among" (p. 50) Chinese college undergraduates. While we are charged as educators with recognizing and undermining any system that would shortchange our students or any population, language learning can - and does - provide individuals with new skills and opportunities, new ideas of self, and new understandings of second and native cultures that will serve them for a lifetime. In the hopes of achieving productive bilingualism for the students of the institution's EAP program, let us attempt to view the successes and shortcomings of the university's program through the eyes of the students themselves.

## **Chapter III: Methodology**

### **Research Question**

Do specific Chinese student perceptions, in regard to their progression toward an imagined community, precipitate corresponding reactions of resistance or investment in EAP courses?

### **Participants**

The participants for the English Learning Experience Interview were 3 female and 4 male Chinese students formerly enrolled in the English for Academic Purposes program at the university. Each participant had completed at least one semester of study in the EAP. The participants were recruited from the population of the researcher's former EAP students with emails soliciting participation, and from an extracurricular organization of Chinese international students.

The sample size was smaller than ideal at seven participants. In addition to the efforts above, the researcher also briefly presented the study to current EAP students in EAP courses to recruit volunteers. Emails were sent to graduates of the MA TESL program at the university in an effort to garner Chinese EAP students of these instructors. Colleagues in the English department were consulted by the researcher and his research advisor for other ideas to augment participation. None of these additional efforts led to further participation. Potential explanations for this response will be explored further in the Limitations section.

All participant names used throughout this report are pseudonyms.

Table 3.1: Participant Demographics

Interview Informants' Demographic Information					
<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Time Studying English</u>	<u>Time in the U.S.</u>	<u>Time Passed since Last EAP Course</u>
Ju	23	f	5+ years	1 year, 9 months	1 year
Li	21	f	12 years	9 months	1 semester
Song	21	m	9 years	1 year, 9 months	1 year
Zhilan	21	f	10 years	9 months	1 semester
Pengfei	22	m	14 years	1 year, 9 months	1 year
Bo	23	m	11 years	3 years	2 years
Shanyuan	22	m	10 years	1 year, 6 months	6 months

## Materials

**Interview.** *The English learning experience interview.* The English Learning Experience Interview (ELEI) of 18 questions detailed each participant's expectations, actual experiences, and reactions in the EAP classroom. The ELEI elicited the participant's reactions (e.g., increased participation, truancy) to the direction of the class. The interview focused on the areas of Student Investment, Student Resistance, and Imagined Community. Interview questions from each category were interspersed throughout the interview. An example of a question from the ELEI is: *How do you react in the classroom when the teacher is covering a topic you think will advance your English?* For a complete list of the ELEI questions, refer to Appendix A.

**Recording device.** All live conversations were audio-recorded on the researcher's password-protected smartphone and password-protected laptop and uploaded to his secure password-protected cloud account. The audio recordings were deleted from the smartphone upon

successful upload to the cloud. All audio files will be deleted from the researcher's computer and cloud account upon completion of his degree.

### **Procedure**

The interview meeting occurred asynchronously between one participant and the researcher, and consisted of the ELEI. Each participant spent roughly one hour responding to the ELEI questions. Each meeting was audio-recorded on the researcher's smartphone and computer and uploaded to his secure password-protected cloud account. The audio recordings were deleted from the smartphone upon successful upload to the cloud. All audio files will be deleted from the computer and cloud account upon completion of his degree. The ELEI was supplemented with the researcher's notes, which were verified with participants for accuracy of participant intent, as appropriate.

All data was collected with English as the mediating language.

### **Analysis**

After collection from the interview was completed, the data was analyzed for trends pertaining to the research question. Data from the ELEI was analyzed with an ethnographic focus. Generally, the data was analyzed to find if Chinese students exhibit thematic reactions in their EAP studies in regard to their perceived progression toward an English-speaking imagined community.

**Setting**

The English Learning Experience Interview was conducted either in a quiet classroom in the English department, or a study room of the library of the university. Each interview was conducted individually with the researcher and audio-recorded.

## Chapter IV: Discussion

When considering if specific Chinese student perceptions - in regard to their own identity and movement toward an English-speaking imagined community - precipitate corresponding reactions of resistance or investment in the students' EAP courses, it was expected to find that these seven students engage more when they see clear links between the classroom content and their imagined communities, and that they resist or withdraw when those links are not present. From the data collected, no such link was found. The participants interviewed regarded it as their duty to attend to every lesson, whether particularly invested in the topic or not, and did not seem to engage in thoughts of movement toward an English-speaking community.

Wenger's "fundamentally temporal" identity is limited here. Surely the students are continuously experiencing shifts in identity, as any individual will, but trust in informants' identity, and cultural and social capital seemed sure. Participants did not describe troubles related to a shifting identity, as it appeared that none of the informants was undergoing a major change in identity, if any such change was happening at all. Negotiation of their identities is certain as they study abroad, but the situation seemed to be viewed generally as a temporary one, and not a cause of concern. Due to faith in their native cultural and social capital, contributors did not endure or ascribe to any legitimizing identities that individuals or institutions in the U.S. may have tried to apply to them.

As the study concerned one population, while there were certain to be differences among individuals, it was also expected that cultural mores would lead to similar responses to similar situations. For instance, Chinese students might be expected to perceive the loss of face (to either the student or the teacher) to be too great to contradict a teacher in class, no matter how strong

the students' opposition to the teacher's outlook. While some such correlation regarding docility and respect for the instructor, course, and its lessons was found in most cases, the participants sometimes held varying opinions toward study and engagement.

The participants do not seem to suffer from any dynamic of a hegemony of English, and do not seem to be excluded from power or an English-speaking community because of it. Participants spoke of the resources necessary for a family to send its child abroad, and it could be argued that they as children of families of means benefit from any status quo currently at play.

### **Thematic Responses**

All names used in discussion of participant responses are pseudonyms.

Certain overall themes did emerge among the responses of this study's participants. Time in the EAP is generally expected, or known to be a possibility. Students recognize the EAP's ability to offer useful basic skills for an American university environment, skills that may not be addressed or needed in China - both English language use and academic skills, such as citation, as well. Contributors also noted the program as an appropriately relaxed environment for students new to a culture, and that they made friends while in the program. Respect for any teacher and course is expected, even when class time does not seem useful to the student. Along those lines, little rebelliousness and rebellious behavior was found among the participants. The interviewees showed some preference for solitary methods of language study, despite their living in a country using the TL. The overriding goal for English in their lives was to find work. The participants have a plan for life laid out for the next several years; it is on track, predictable, and includes - but is not heavily tied to - English and an English-speaking community.



**Imagined communities.** In discussing the use of English in participants' future lives, the research did not find a driving concern to be part of any English-speaking community. Goals for English mostly began and ended with continuing education, and careers. Two participants, Ju and Shanyuan, noted social aspects of learning English over career-oriented goals. Ju referenced speaking "to whoever I want" as an ultimate goal for English, and Shanyuan felt it was important to engage and speak to people, "the way you learn the language as a native speaker...you understand their culture very much." All other responses revolved around graduate degrees abroad, finding work, and working - in China. Since these students may not be concerned with becoming "American" or with the trappings of integration or assimilation due to their impending return to China, reactions concerning improving English and course relevance in that goal were more common than any related to progression toward an imagined community or those concerning the student's identity per se.

Naturally, all the participants had a desire to speak English fluently. As Ju was asked her feelings about fluent speakers, her eyes became starry and she exclaimed, "Ooh, I want to speak like that!" The participants view Americans/fluent English speakers as role models of sorts, but generally focus on English skill rather than participation in the community. They want to speak as well as a fluent speaker, but might not particularly care about integrating into the community.

There was no heavy feeling of current connection with the English-speaking community from the participants, although Song, Bo, and Shanyuan have each made an American friend they spend time with. Song has a roommate he interacts with and counts as a good friend, Bo had a roommate last year with whom he still spends time, and Shanyuan made a friend from St. Paul with whom he currently engages. Two other participants noted American roommates, but have

not forged any relationships with them. Many causes of a chasm between Chinese students and the American English-speaking community came up during our discussions: unfamiliarity with American humor, quick speech and quick change of broad topics, and inability to keep pace due to stalling in study participants' speech or thought.

Each contributor noted their own perceived inadequacy in dealing with the English-speaking community. Even Song, the only participant to ever affirm himself as an English speaker, noted he will "feel like I'm outside the group if the group is full of too many Americans." Bo had similar feelings, describing feeling outside of the group, the speed with which fluent speakers speak, and how hard he tries to listen so he can engage. Confidence to interact seems a major obstacle among the thoughts expressed by the informants. Pengfei mentioned this specifically and repeatedly during his interview.

The seven participants demonstrated split reactions to this void between themselves and speakers: Ju and Song were incentivized to learn more vocabulary and talk to more people in order to bridge the gap, whereas Li and Zhilan recounted stories of aversion to dealings with the English-speaking community, finding solidarity among other Chinese students instead. Pengfei spoke of enjoying speaking with English speakers, but also admitted he does not engage with his American roommates and finds it difficult to choose topics to engage English speakers. While both Bo and Shanyuan are members of a group off-campus that puts them in touch with many native English speakers, neither noted developing relationships with English speakers, both described spending most of their time with other Chinese students.

In the future, three of the participants plan to continue their studies in English-speaking countries after they complete their time at the institution, two specifically for a master's degree.

Two are currently graduate students in the U.S., one of whom would like to pursue doctoral studies in Australia or the U.S. after gaining work experience. This is the most prominent imagined community among the participants: postgraduate student on an English-speaking campus. The participants seem to consider this continued education a given, and do not seem to connect the EAP and their performance in it to be a critical factor in moving forward. Therefore, their investment or resistance in EAP courses would not be precipitated by their perception of advancement toward this goal. Furthermore, all the participants discussed returning to and living out their life in China, with the exception of Pengfei who is simply unsure where life will lead him yet. Currently, life in China most likely precludes participation and inclusion in an English-speaking community - especially given some of the participants' reluctance to participate in such a community while living abroad in an English-speaking country. Some doubted they would motivate themselves in further participation with an English-speaking community in their continued studies in an English-speaking area. Several contributors discussed speaking to their children in English, teaching them English, and sending them abroad to learn English, but as the participants are demonstrating in their own lives, this arc is possible without ever engaging in the English-speaking community or conceiving of one's self as a part of that community.

When asked how they could move themselves toward more skilled use of English, participants listed improving vocabulary, accent or grammar; using the internet; or reading articles and watching movies as strategies. Ju and Song, the informants most willing to engage with English speakers, noted such engagements with speakers as an important strategy. Shanyuan also discussed engagement strategies as important, and valued English as a social bridge over English as a career tool, but he related less demonstration of utilizing such tools in

his current environment. While each of these strategies will improve aspects of English, it is somewhat striking that more passive strategies were listed more often as both hypothetical or practiced than the active strategy of engaging with actual speakers while living in a target language country. This speaks to a somewhat unmotivated attitude toward participating in the community or advancing toward an imagined English-speaking community.

In the same vein, only Shanyuan and Ju listed notions of “talking to whoever I want” as the most important goal for their English. All the other contributors noted job-related goals (jobs they intend to hold in China) as paramount. When asked for the most important step that they could take to reach their ultimate goal for English in their lives, the participants listed preparing for tests such as the GMAT or TOEFL (as hiring bodies in China will focus on these according to Li), building vocabulary, watching movies in English, and speaking with native speakers. Again, engaging speakers of the target language while within the target culture was among the responses, but was not listed by the majority of informants, nor often described as a practiced technique.

In discussing their futures and English use within those futures, it does not seem that these participants are generally concerned with becoming part of an English-speaking community, and seem to hold no such imagined community in mind. If an imagined community is commonly held by these participants it is that of postgraduate student or successfully employed worker in China, with English as part of their skill set. Involvement in the EAP seems a necessary step in their path toward those communities, but not one whose influence is great enough to hinder or concern the informants.

**Resistance.** As a reminder, “resistance” is used rather broadly here, and defined as off-task behavior according to the goals and rules of the instructor of the class.

The instances of resistance that the contributors related included several reports of playing on phones, speaking Chinese, ignoring the teacher and/or not participating, and working on homework for other courses during class time. Song admitted to doodling in class, and cheating during quizzes. Having had five of the seven contributors as former students, the researcher would classify each of those students a “good” student, and their participation in any of these infractions relatively minor. When asked what their strongest reactions to an instructor or course that was not meeting their expectations would be, ignoring the teacher and not participating came up again, as did cell phone use. Li spoke of skipping class for a nap, or even napping in class - but felt these showed too much “disrespect to the teacher.” Zhilan and Bo admitted that playing on their phones was a possibility, but that talking to friends was too disrespectful. Zhilan, Bo, and Shanyuan noted they might respectfully talk to the teacher after class to try to pinpoint what were the most important lessons to take from the class as the goal had remained unclear during the lesson, to discuss class expectations, or to share ideas on teaching methods. Pengfei maintained his trust in the teacher’s ability to choose appropriate material and would listen to the lessons, for whatever it was worth to him.

Overall, there was an overriding feeling of respect for any teacher or class from the informants. Students generally felt that teachers had chosen lessons for good reason, and while they as students may at times not have understood the impetus for the lesson or felt the lesson’s import, it was their duty as a student to respect the teacher. Rules were commonly broken overwhelmingly for one reason: the amount of Chinese students in courses and easy access to

Mandarin. Participants felt that when their comprehension skills failed them, clarifying in Mandarin with a Chinese colleague was a simple and effective strategy. Grouping with other Chinese students when possible (and completing tasks in Mandarin) was also found to be easy to achieve, and effective in navigating EAP courses. Working with other Chinese students was related as a common strategy for avoiding multicultural groupings where English use would be necessary and interactions would be more linguistically challenging and culturally uncomfortable. So, in effect, Chinese international students are at times creating their own interpretations of EAP courses where English is not used as the main language to complete activities if the instructor is not vigilant.

Not only were the contributors avoiding the challenge of engaging with the language, they noted also that it would be very strange to use English with other Mandarin speakers. To do so would have made them seem awkward, pompous, or “crazy” to other Chinese students. Ju mentioned that Chinese students might not only be too shy to use English with international students from other cultures, but with Chinese students as well. Spencer-Oatey, Dauber, Jing, and Lifei (2017) conducted research into Chinese student’s overall social integration into a campus community. They note that while all international students had some difficulty socializing with people from other countries, “Chinese students found it noticeably more difficult than others” (p. 747). Chinese students in the study asked to reflect on this felt there were “Too many Chinese student in the course,” and that there was “No opportunity as all my classmates and roommates are Chinese” (p. 748). They also noted individual factors to explain this discrepancy: not studying abroad for the social factor; it being unnecessary to make foreign friends as they had their own [Chinese] friends, or apps/the internet to make friends; the degree

of willingness to overcome challenges versus being socially “lazy;” maintaining face, and the Chinese notion of “suiyuan,” letting fate take its own course. Spencer-Oatey et al. (2017) also found their participants were unsure what to talk to students from other nations about, and that cultural differences like direct versus indirect styles of communication proved challenging (pp. 749-751). Some of these opinions reflect notions described by the participants in this current project, and suggest that some warranted pressure on Chinese students might be beneficial to their augmented participation and integration - to encouraging the full use of their time in an experience abroad.

Ju discussed going off-task during her Listening and Speaking course as “our teacher always talk[s] about the textbook and let us [made us] read the articles,” believing that “Listening and Speaking need[s] us to talk to each other and communicate more.” This led her and her classmates to remain quiet in Listening and Speaking, and engage instead in her Reading and Writing class where she felt instruction was worthwhile, and where she felt she better learned listening and speaking skills. This is one of the only times a participant mentioned the relevance of the class, or its methodology, as a motivation in increasing her participation. The reaction seems to stem from this relevance more than movement toward an imagined community.

Both Li and Song expressed challenges and resistive behaviors - such as avoiding multi-cultural groups or refraining from adding to conversations - related to the disparity between the Chinese and the American mind. Cultural Orientation (a course intended to orient international students to American academics, culture, and discussions) was challenging for this reason. Song had trouble determining the overall goal of the class, and Li had trouble completing some

assignments for the course, not due to language comprehension, but due more to cultural differences. Participants related having no such discussions in China, and Li specifically mentioned an assignment on religion noting that China is heavily secular, “I can’t understand,” “I have no idea on it.” In a course intended to familiarize students with aspects of education in the United States, in these cases at least, the instructors may have made assumptions about the accessibility of the materials, thought processes, and academic skills necessary for international students to succeed in the course.

When asked how they would respond to another student in class disrespecting the instructor during a lesson they found to be unimportant, Ju labelled the student “stupid.” Li found the student “so rude...in Chinese words, I think this student doesn’t have his or her parents.” Zhilan also felt the student was “very impolite.” Song thought the student was “brave,” but also wanted a word with more negative connotations to label the student. Pengwei thought the student was just being honest, but Pengwei himself would ignore the student and continue participating respectfully in the course. Ju and Bo would address the student if they knew the student. Shanyuan would address the student whether he knew the student or not, feeling the student had no right to disrupt other students’ education. Otherwise, the participants would ignore the student. The contributors were more concerned with their own behavior and display of respect than that of another student. If the student was not disrupting their own work in the course, they felt no need - or in Li’s case, no authority - to intervene.

Pengwei noted that even when a class focused on a topic he was already familiar with, he took it as an opportunity to practice his listening skill rather than focusing on any form of



resistance. This is an opportunity he feels that many other students take for granted, as even topics within his background knowledge led to his participation.

**Investment.** The informants also made note of aspects of the EAP program that increased their investment. The participants listed making friends, exposure to new cultures and topics, group discussions, good opportunities to learn basics like dictionary use or how to write for an academic audience, relaxed classes and games, and kind and helpful instructors as their positive experiences in the EAP.

None of the participants came up with particular reactions of investment in their classes. They had no examples of investment for two reasons. One reason was that they generally felt that they were engaged students overall. Li summarized the feeling of the participants: “Despite my teacher or the job or the task, I...always...try my best to do it, so I cannot...do it... ‘more, more’ best [laughs]!” The second reason many of the participants felt they lacked examples of investment is that they feel that Chinese students will not show a great deal of interest in a lesson, even if curious about the lesson. Pengfei ascribed this to an unwillingness to speak out due to embarrassment over one’s English. Zhilan felt she would engage more with the topic outside of class if she were really interested, reading more related to the topic, in Mandarin. Bo felt that Chinese students’ upbringing in Chinese culture affected their engagement with class, even for students with good English skills, “...because our culture [teaches] us ‘Don’t show [off] in the class’.”

The participants worked harder in an EAP course when the work was more challenging. Again, they did not seem to show increased investment because of an inspiring teacher, an interesting topic or to improve their English per se, but because it was necessary to complete a

task or maintain a grade. Shanyuan mentioned the importance of an “A” twice during his interview. The informants spoke of working harder for final papers because of the challenge of writing in English, or when using new skills like finding and citing sources. In one case, Song described working especially hard on a paper because of a personal interest in the topic he had chosen.

Taguchi, Majid, and Papi’s (2009) discussion of Chinese students’ motivations in comparison to those of Iranian or Japanese students supports this view of their investment: “the motivation of the Chinese students was solely instrumental because the Chinese participants only cared about the utility of English in their future job and in gaining a high salary” (p. 70). Taguchi et al. continue on to interpret why this may be in light of China’s recent one child policy: “People retire at a relatively early age in China, usually with extremely low pensions, so their children have the responsibility and obligation to take care of them as they become the sole breadwinners of the family” (p. 80). They note that Chinese students may feel great pressure from their parents to study well and increase the family’s prestige, and that the students may feel duty-bound to carry out this task as their parents raised them, “even though they may not be intrinsically motivated to do so themselves” and that “Most young people will obey their parents even if they are not interested in the major or career that their parents have chosen for them” (p. 80). Finally, they found that “Broadly speaking, they [Chinese students] simply cannot afford the luxury of caring for the niceties of the classroom experience” (p. 87), the pressure and stakes for them are too high. In this light, we see that true investment might well be mitigated.

All the participants felt that the grades they ultimately received were fair in relation to the work they had done for their projects. Li was at times surprised by grades, as she had incorrectly completed the assignment, believing she had understood the requirements.

The participants knew of the possibility of mandatory study in the EAP, and were not upset about their placement in the courses. Although Pengfei was initially “sad”: “I think I’m one of the ‘good’ students!...As for the first test [the initial university placement test], for me, I [got] this low grade. So, I think it’s sad...but I can accept it.” Shanyuan admitted he initially thought the program was a waste of time, but after completing the program, he feels the EAP helped him a great deal, especially with speaking. The informants found some value in the courses in general, although Ju would have preferred not to take them, if her English had been better. Song knew of a student who had not been required to take the EAP courses, and recounted that studies had not gone well for this student moving directly into academic major courses. Pengfei found “its [the EAP’s] existence reasonable, so I like to take part in EAP class.” He wasn’t disappointed in any EAP course, reasoning, “It also can increase my language skill.” As noted above, they did find value in the program, such as Ju’s appreciation for the relaxed environment of the EAP while negotiating a new culture and her preference to speak with Americans after the EAP, Pengfei’s recognition of the “invisible” language skill changes that would come from taking the courses, and the impetus it gave students to interact in English. Song also liked that the EAP allowed students to fit into a new environment, and the academic study skills it taught.

## **Conclusion**

As no particular English-language imagined community seems to exist among these students - or at best seems to be a foregone conclusion in their minds, it is not possible to answer the research question in detail as it is posed: Do specific Chinese student perceptions, in regard to their progression toward an imagined community, precipitate corresponding reactions of resistance or investment in EAP courses? No, the informants for this project seem to have no concerns about moving toward an English-speaking community, and the imagined community of “successful professional in China” seems sure in their minds. The participants seem to consider their postgraduate education or careers with or without English a given, and do not seem to connect the EAP and their performance in it to be a critical factor in moving forward. Therefore, their investment or resistance in EAP courses is not precipitated by their perception of advancement toward this goal. Rather, they invest or resist in EAP courses due to factors such as a large current population of Chinese students in the program, disparate understanding between the Chinese and American mind, or cultural mores of respect for a teacher and a course.

After the recording devices were off and Pengfei and the researcher were exchanging pleasantries as they parted ways, Pengfei discussed how he had asked other former EAP students about the researcher’s recruitment email. They had shown no interest whatsoever. He shared that students often just want to forget about the EAP when they have completed its courses, as they were not engaged in the first place. So, while the participants in this study seem to have some appreciation for the program, this may not be the general consensus among Chinese international students, or EAP students in general. The study seems to have highlighted an issue of integration among Chinese international students. This lack of involvement with the English-speaking

community stems from issues concerning Chinese international students, the American population in regard to international students, and what appears to be no thought of movement toward an English-speaking imagined community among Chinese students in the EAP.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited by the sample size. A total of seven students were interviewed for the project. While some themes emerged, it is not possible to determine if they are contributing factors to motivation in the broader Chinese student population at the institution. All participants were students of the EAP program at the university, interviewed with an intent to analyze the university's program, and any results may not be generalizable to other institutions and programs.

Chang (2012) discusses the importance of “guanxi,” the giving and receiving of favors among members of a relationship in the Chinese mind. It would seem that with students from the researcher's courses who responded, the researcher had achieved a mid-level “mixed tie,” and they may have felt it was appropriate to do this favor for the former instructor. Perhaps with former students who did not respond, the students felt the researcher had not contributed enough to the mutual relationship to warrant a favor such as this. Obviously, with students that the researcher had never met or worked with, there was no relationship at all and very low motivation then for them to assist with the project. Previous lack of relationship-building may have made guanxi a limiting factor with Chinese students.

Along the same lines, a researcher with more extensive cultural fluency or Mandarin language fluency would likely be able to delve deeper into the impulses of international Chinese

student behavior. Mandarin as the mediating language would have allowed participants to more perfectly express their intentions.

While the hope was that participants could draw on their own experiences to respond to the questions, there were times they could not recall a situation that responded directly to the question as posed. The researcher tried to guide them toward responses that could answer the question speaking directly from their experiences in the EAP, but at times participants responded hypothetically.

All participants were sampled from the same EAP program at the same university, and this may limit the ability to generalize results. Likewise, the students who responded may have felt similar levels of guanxi with the researcher and former instructor, and may have similar views of the EAP - this would not allow for a broad sampling of base attitudes on the program. Bo and Shanyuan were recruited from a group outside of the researcher's former students and had no previous history with the researcher. They did however demonstrate similar attributes of conscientious and supportive students.

Any reworking of this study would do well to address these limitations in its design.

### **Future Studies and Implications**

While the first priority would always be for EAP instructors to provide lessons that all students value and which engage the students of their own accord, EAP instructors might also remind students that they are constantly being exposed to English in class, and that even if the topic is one that they happen to know already, there is always opportunity for learning - like listening skill or vocabulary growth for instance.

Further research is needed to better understand where Chinese students may have difficulty bridging the gap in their cross-cultural studies, specifically in the Cultural Orientation course. It is possible that instructors have difficulty ensuring that the cultural gap between the instructor's notions and culture in the U.S, and those notions held by the multiple cultures in the course population is closed. Research as to which of these factors, or if both of these factors, results in the dissonance Chinese students reported feeling in the course would be beneficial. Ties and comparisons between their personal interests and their courses, as well as thorough student feedback in such a course would allow Cultural Orientation to better reach its goals.

Participants generally considered EAP courses relaxed, but also easy. The relaxed atmosphere of the program is of value, but increasing the challenge of the courses might imbue the program with more relevance and reason for Chinese students to engage. However, if participation in the EAP is seen as merely a stepping stone, the program risks losing its welcoming atmosphere for students new to the country, without necessarily adding any aspect students will truly value. Despite any level of difficulty, instructors should describe and review assignment instructions carefully, and provide them both orally and in writing to aid in clarity.

According to UNESCO (2019), 309,837 Chinese students came to the United States to study in 2016. Statista (2019) shows a steady rise of Chinese students studying in the United States from academic year 2007/2008 (81,127 students) - 2017/2018 (363,341 students). Given that the population of Chinese students in international programs will likely remain high, and potentially continue to grow, EAP instructors might push as hard as comfortable (while maintaining the relaxed atmosphere students value) to break up groups of all or mostly all Chinese students. When such groups are unavoidable, instructors should monitor them closely

for English use, and stress the current opportunity of living abroad - again pushing as hard as comfortable - with the encouragement to engage with English and English-speakers. While the command to use the TL may seem uncalled for for several reasons such as those in Lightbown and Spada's (2017, p. 32) discussion that rather than focusing solely on a TL for students - especially young students - "considerable research suggests continued development of the child's home language actually contributes in the long term to more successful acquisition of the school language." In the case of the EAP it may be more appropriate considering the age, English-language study backgrounds, fully-developed L1, limited confidence in English skill, and "weak" self-motivation of Chinese students (as reported by the participants in this project).

In similar support of the above discussion, Cao, Zhu, and Meng (2017) stress the importance of cultural engagement of international students. They note that individual studies have found inconsistent results as to the preferred acculturation strategies of Chinese students abroad (considering integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization as possible strategies) (p. 92), but that integration and separation (the most preferred strategies in their study) are both "characterized by a high level of identification with the heritage culture." Postulating that Chinese international students being "short-term visitors" and having "built a closely knit co-national network" often keeps Chinese students from engaging completely with the host culture (p. 93). Cao et al. advocate "the need to mix Chinese international students with domestic students and other international students because these social ties can help Chinese students shape positive attitudes towards the host culture and integrate or assimilate into the mainstream culture, instead of being locked out of it" (p. 94).



Based on the views of the participants in this study, “being locked out of it” seems to be the more major concern. While participants described insular actions during their interviews, they also recounted uncertainties of how to engage Americans. Awareness of this issue and training designed to enable graduate assistant instructors to create lessons, projects and opportunities for Chinese students to integrate with American culture and individuals would encourage Chinese international students to view themselves as capable English speakers and to engage actively in the EAP. Cao et al. also suggest “regular and group-based campus activities...organized by the host university management,” peer projects matching international and domestic students, and seminars or workshops on intercultural training (p. 94). The EAP can stress involvement, and work to build confidence in Chinese students as English speakers outside of class along these lines. The EAP would do well to bring Chinese students to demonstrate to themselves, through projects or interactions, their capabilities. Each participant of the current study sat and discussed their goals and abstract ideas with little trouble during the interview, even with two of the participants only having spent one semester in an English-speaking country, though each informant belittled their own abilities. Inside the classroom, this may well be due to cultural humility as proposed by Bo, but self-doubt in the ability to engage in English outside the classroom was consistent across all the interviews.

Recalling the troubles recounted by participants in this study, and those from Spencer-Oatey et al. (2017), these are the kinds of “pressure” the EAP may want to put on its Chinese international students - healthy encouragement to participate in cultural and language endeavors outside of the classroom. This might come in the form of encouragement linked to a grade, as appropriate, and seemingly prioritized by the participants. Any of these suggestions could be

undertaken by EAP leadership and/or graduate assistants as well as “university management.” The EAP’s Cultural Orientation course does take on some of these suggestions, but further focus on these goals in the EAP’s other offerings would benefit students as well.

While informants did not seem concerned by the effect the EAP would have on their lives, and again, did not feel failure in the program was a possibility, it would be inaccurate to state categorically that no imagined community exists in the participants’ minds. They do, seemingly quite assuredly, see themselves one day as post-graduate students or Chinese workers with English skills. Further research into what exactly this specific imagined community, rather than an English-speaking community, precipitates in the informants’ studies is necessary to corroborate or refute the findings suggested in this work.

For study focus, this project examined one population of EAP student, the international Chinese student. It would provide extended data to see studies considering other populations of students within the EAP, even if at the same lone institution, to then compare and contrast the various reactions of populations of students in the program.

As cultural integration developed as a side-note of this research, rather than as the subject of the study, research focused on the integration strategies, successes and failures of Chinese international students at the institution would provide more in-depth data specifically geared toward this topic.

Participant confidence in their cultural identity and their futures could be interpreted as a result of a privileged background. Some informant comments would support such an interpretation. Future studies might also look into the link between privilege and opportunity, and perception of and engagement in the EAP.

It is not the researcher's intent to portray any participant or international Chinese EAP enrollees at the university in general as unmotivated or careless students. As he has taught five of the seven contributors, he knows that the opposite is true of at least those five, and trusts the same of the remaining two participants from his interaction with them. The results of this current research suggest that the informants may have been set on a particular trajectory by their culture and position within that culture. The assumption of a desire to move toward an imagined English-speaking community was made in the current research question. That assumption was called into question during the process of this project. Research into which desired English-speaking imagined communities (particularly post-graduate student or Chinese worker), if any, commonly exist in the typical Chinese EAP student's mind at this institution would be an appropriate first step in any duplication of the study at hand.

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## Appendix A: English Learning Experience Interview (ELEI)

Research ID# \_\_\_\_\_

1. Tell me a story about a positive experience learning English in the U.S.
2. How do you react in the classroom when the teacher is covering a topic you think will advance your English?
3. Did you expect to be placed in an EAP course? How did the placement make you feel?
4. Tell me a story about a less than ideal experience learning English in the U.S.
5. Tell me about a time you disobeyed a classroom rule in the EAP.
6. Why do you think you broke that rule?
7. How do you feel about English speakers, especially Americans?\*
8. How do you imagine yourself in relation to them? What is your role with them now?\*
9. How do you react in the classroom when the teacher is covering a topic you already know, or that you think will not advance your English?
10. Tell me a story about a time you worked even harder than usual for an English class.
11. What made you work especially hard in that instance?
12. How did you feel about the grade you were ultimately given for your hard work?
13. How do you see learning English benefitting you in the future?\*
14. When you think about fluent English speakers, what do you think it takes for you to be a part of that group?\*
15. What is your ultimate goal with English?
16. What would be your strongest reaction to a teacher that isn't teaching a course to your expectations?
17. How do you feel about students that rebel against a teacher when the teacher is not teaching ideally?
18. What is the most important thing you can do to reach your ultimate goal with English?

\*Questions 7, 8, 13, and 14 modified from Kinginger, p. 223.

Kinginger, C. (2004). Alice doesn't live here anymore: Foreign language learning and identity reconstruction. *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts*, 21(2), 219-242.

### **a. Imagined Community**

7. How do you feel about English speakers, especially Americans?  
(As role models for your speech? Do you want to be part of that group? What would being part of that group offer you?)
8. How do you imagine yourself in relation to them? What is your role with them now?
13. How do you see learning English benefitting you in the future?
14. When you think about fluent English speakers, what do you think it takes for you to be a part of that group?
15. What is your ultimate goal with English?
18. What is the most important thing you can do to reach your ultimate goal with English?

**(SIX TOTAL)**



**b. Resistance**

4. Tell me a story about a less than ideal experience learning English in the U.S.
  5. Tell me about a time you disobeyed a classroom rule in the EAP.
  6. Why do you think you broke that rule?
  9. How do you react in the classroom when the teacher is covering a topic you already know, or that you think will not advance your English?  
(Imagine the teacher is going to talk about SVO order for a lesson, which you understand. What would you do?)
  16. What would be your strongest reaction to a teacher that isn't teaching a course to your expectations?  
(Imagine a teacher who knows little about teaching English, is unfair, has weak teaching skills, and is racist. How would you react to such a situation?)
  17. How do you feel about students that rebel against a teacher when the teacher is not teaching ideally?  
(Imagine a teacher discussing grammar that he or she does not know well. Some students look at their phones during the lesson instead of listening to the lesson. Is the response of these students appropriate?)
- (SIX TOTAL)**

**c. Investment**

1. Tell me a story about an ideal experience learning English in the U.S.
  2. How do you react in the classroom when the teacher is covering a topic you think will advance your English?  
(How would you react in a session on APA standards, which you want to know, but don't know yet?)
  3. Did you expect to be placed in an EAP course? How did the placement make you feel?
  10. Tell me a story about a time you worked even harder than usual for an English class.  
(Imagine the teacher gave an assignment to write an academic paper, which you want to know how to do, but don't know yet. How would you address this assignment?)
  11. What made you work especially hard in that instance?
  12. How did you feel about the grade you were ultimately given for your hard work?
- (SIX TOTAL)**

## Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

### Chinese Students' Responses to Perceived Progress toward an Imagined Community in a University EAP Program

**Researcher**

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**Research Advisor**

Dr. James Robinson  
 TESL Program Director, Department of English  
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 (320) 308-4956  
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In this interview project, the researcher will explore student responses to instruction according to student expectations. To do this, he is inviting you to participate in an interview response activity. The interview will cover your thoughts and feelings on your EAP courses and instructors, and your reactions to them. It will last about one hour. The researcher is **NOT** testing you or your language abilities. He is evaluating how students react to instruction, and how that instruction coincides with their expectations.

- This is **NOT** a test of your ability, and there is no personal risk.
- Your name will **NOT** be used in data analysis and report.
- Your participation is **voluntary**. You may withdraw at any time.
- If you do not participate, it will **NOT** affect your relationship with the researcher or university.
- Your participation will **NOT** affect your grades in any class.
- The research results may be presented or published. (Your name will **NEVER** be used.)
- If you are interested the results, the researcher can share that information with you when it is available. Please contact the researcher (contact information at the top of this document).
- There is no reward for contributing to the study.

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If you give your permission to use the data for research, please sign below.

Are you at least 18 years of age? **NO** \_\_\_ **YES** \_\_\_

If you answered **NO**, please stop. Thank you. If you answered **YES**, please continue.

**Name in Print** ..... \_\_\_\_\_

**Date** ..... \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature** ..... \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: IRB Approval Document



### Institutional Review Board (IRB)

720 4th Avenue South AS 210, St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498

**Name:** Chad Kuehn  
**Email:** ctkuehn@stcloudstate.edu

### IRB PROTOCOL DETERMINATION: Exempt Review

**Project Title:** Chinese Students' Responses to Progress toward an Imagined Community in a University EAP Program

**Advisor:** James Robinson

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol to conduct research involving human subjects. Your project has been: **APPROVED**

Please note the following important information concerning IRB projects:

- The principal investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of participants in this project. Any adverse events must be reported to the IRB as soon as possible (ex. research related injuries, harmful outcomes, significant withdrawal of subject population, etc.).

- For expedited or full board review, the principal investigator must submit a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated on this letter to report conclusion of the research or request an extension.

- Exempt review only requires the submission of a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated in this letter if an extension of time is needed.

- Approved consent forms display the official IRB stamp which documents approval and expiration dates. If a renewal is requested and approved, new consent forms will be officially stamped and reflect the new approval and expiration dates.

- The principal investigator must seek approval for any changes to the study (ex. research design, consent process, survey/interview instruments, funding source, etc.). The IRB reserves the right to review the research at any time.

If we can be of further assistance, feel free to contact the IRB at 320-308-4932 or email [ResearchNow@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:ResearchNow@stcloudstate.edu) and please reference the SCSU IRB number when corresponding.

**IRB Chair:**

Dr. Benjamin Witts  
Associate Professor- Applied Behavior Analysis  
Department of Community Psychology, Counseling, and Family Therapy

**IRB Institutional Official:**

Dr. Latha Ramakrishnan  
Interim Associate Provost for Research  
Dean of Graduate Studies

#### OFFICE USE ONLY

SCSU IRB# 1874 - 2403	Type: Exempt Review	Today's Date: 2/12/2019
1st Year Approval Date: 2/11/2019	2nd Year Approval Date:	3rd Year Approval Date:
1st Year Expiration Date:	2nd Year Expiration Date:	3rd Year Expiration Date: