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**I came, but I'm lost: Learning stories of three Chinese international students in Canada
Je suis venu, mais je suis perdu: Histoires d'apprentissage de trois étudiants internationaux
Chinois au Canada**

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Abstract

The number of international students arriving in Canada is increasing annually, with students from China accounting for the highest number. Grounded in sociocultural theories of second language learning, this paper presents selected findings from a narrative study investigating the experiences of Chinese international students preparing for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) tests in Canada. Based on their own accounts of English learning before and after coming to Vancouver, this paper finds that the participants recognized the capital and power of English and foreign qualifications, and regarded international education as a sanctuary from examinations in China. By comparing their current learning in different settings, they expressed confusion about engaging/disengaging in different communities, and about their past expectations, current experiences as well as future possibilities. This paper hopes to draw the attention of stakeholders (institutions and test issuing organizations) to the more nuanced challenges that international students encounter so that better support can be provided to international students learning English for academic purposes.

Résumé

Le nombre d'étudiants internationaux arrivant au Canada accroît annuellement, avec des étudiants Chinois représentant le plus grand nombre. Fondé sur les théories socio-culturelles de l'apprentissage de langues secondes, ce papier présente des résultats sélectionnés provenant d'une étude narrative enquêtant sur les expériences des étudiants internationaux Chinois se préparant pour les épreuves du Système d'Évaluation en Langue Anglaise Internationale au Canada. Basé sur leurs propres récits de l'apprentissage de l'anglais avant et après leur arrivée à Vancouver, ce papier conclut que les participants ont reconnu le capital et le pouvoir de l'anglais et des qualifications étrangères, et considèrent l'éducation internationale comme un sanctuaire face aux examens en Chine. En comparant leur apprentissage actuel dans différents contextes, ils ont exprimé de la confusion à s'engager/se désengager dans différentes communautés, et se sont exprimés sur leurs attentes passées, leurs expériences actuelles, ainsi que de leurs possibilités futures. Cet article espère attirer l'attention des parties prenantes (institutions et organisations administrant les tests) sur les défis les plus nuancés auxquels sont confrontés les étudiants internationaux, afin que de meilleurs supports soient offerts à ceux apprenant l'anglais à des fins académiques.

Keywords: Chinese international students; language learning; language proficiency test; narrative inquiry

Mots-clés: étudiants internationaux Chinois; apprentissage des langues; test de maîtrise de la langue; enquête narrative

The pursuit of international education and the internationalization of higher education have become a significant element of Canadian higher education (The Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2013). Where a decade ago they were of interest primarily to practitioners and a handful of scholars, it has now become central to discussions on higher education policy, for example, and has attracted government attention at both provincial and federal levels (Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, 2012). A measure

of the success, effectiveness and value of a higher educational institution now includes its international dimension in teaching, research and service, and in particular, the number of international students that it enrolls. Indeed, statistics on the number of international students, the source countries, and their contribution to national and provincial economies are the most commonly presented information about international education in Canada (CBIE, 2013). The common rationale for increasing numbers of international students is the assertion that it is one of the highest contributing factors of internationalizing the campus (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2007). In practice, however, they are mostly seen in terms of recruitment targets and economic gains. The fact that international students bring \$6 billion to the Canadian economy, for example, is a statistic that is often used to promote international education and reflects the focus on the economic dimensions of internationalization (CBIE, 2013).

Along with the more obvious economic gains, the arrival of international students on Canadian campuses has seen the accompanying growth of English language services, including the business of English language testing. For 75% of the total of 178,000 international students studying in Canada, English is an additional language (CBIE, 2009). Students applying to colleges and universities must demonstrate their knowledge of English (or French¹) if their first language is not English, and they must attain specific proficiency scores in tests such as the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) or TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) as one of the qualifying criteria for admission. Thus, language acquisition, language teaching, and the associated challenges have become important issues in the internationalization process. While the literature on second-language acquisition in relation to issues of identity and investment (Norton, 2010; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Zuengler & Miller, 2006), and the relationship between the language learner and the larger social world (Heller, 2007; Kanno, 2008; Toohey, 2000) is gaining momentum, little research has been conducted on the learning experiences of international students as they prepare for English proficiency tests to enter post-secondary institutions in host countries.

Existing scholarship on international student experience in Western universities address issues such as college and university students' social adjustments, learning strategies, and identity issues (Beck, 2008; Miller, 2000; Montgomery, 2010; Phan, 2008). Research on international student experience identifies language learning as a major challenge for international students in academic settings (CBIE, 2009, 2013; Feast, 2002; Montgomery, 2010; Sawir, 2005; Singh, 2005) despite the IELTS or TOEFL scores these students gained as a requirement for entering the university. Furthermore, in preparation for the language proficiency tests, international students undergo many difficulties and hardship. The 2009 CBIE survey finds that among non-English speaking international students, 25% reported that "passing the English proficiency test was at least somewhat of a problem" (CBIE, 2009, p.31). In particular, "East Asian students are the most likely to report problems with language proficiency tests" (Ibid, p.32). Their experiences can become "arduous, attenuated and even humiliating at times" (Skyrme, 2007, p.360). There is scant research on international students and English language tests in Canadian settings. Students from China constitute the largest group of international students in the post-secondary sector in Canada, and account for 30.45% (80,627 in total) of all international students (CBIE, 2013). Therefore, it is important to research on their learning experiences, and in particular, their English language learning experiences.

¹ While the same is true of students applying to universities and colleges where French is the medium of instruction, the largest percentage of second language learners seek to learn English. This paper is concerned with the latter.

The larger study from which this paper is drawn, investigates the IELTS preparation experience of Chinese international students in Canada. What challenges did they face while preparing for the IELTS examination? How did they experience language learning in different educational settings? What were their expectations of international education? This paper focuses on the experiences of three Chinese students who became positioned as 'language test-takers' arguing that their experiences illuminate a variety of issues that are important to the delivery of English language learning services, and enhances knowledge of the internationalization process.

The paper begins with a brief overview of selected literature on international students as English language learners on Western campuses. This will be followed by a discussion of theoretical constructs and ideas that are useful in understanding their narratives. The suitability of narrative methodology for such a study will be described briefly. Grounded in sociocultural theories of second language learning, the English learning and IELTS preparation experiences of three Chinese international students in Canada will be presented and discussed. The paper concludes with implications for English language teaching and learning and service delivery in post-secondary institutions in Canada.

English Language Learners among International Students

In language learning research on English learners, the foci of studies have shifted from the cognitive process to the sociocultural perspectives on second language learning (Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Toohey, 2000). Though it was generally agreed that language learners would improve their language proficiency if proper strategies were applied, studies on language learning and identity showed that the complex learning process was impacted by subtle factors language learners even could hardly name (Norton, 2000; Norton Pierce, 1995). Scholars argue that the unequal relationship of power, identity and agency should be explored to complement learning strategies and motivations of language learners (Norton & Toohey, 2001).

From the larger body of literature on English language learners at the post-secondary level, the following review presents selected literature on the learning experiences of Chinese international students in English speaking countries, and in particular, the application of narrative inquiry research. Using narrative inquiry, Hsieh (2011) examined the transition experiences of some Chinese students and staff at one British university. The study found that international students and staff faced similar challenges in language, culture, and the establishment of social relationships. In another important study, Hsieh (2006) invited stories from a Chinese female undergraduate Li-Ping studying at an American university. As the only international student, Li-Ping was mostly silent in her class, and viewed as a deficient learner and internalized this inferior identity. Her silence deepened the negative perception of her American classmates of her. The study argued that international students with sufficient English proficiency for academic courses would be considered lesser-beings when native English was the norm of a university.

In a longitudinal narrative study, Gao (2008) explored the language learning motivations of a group of Mainland Chinese international students before and after they studied at a Hong Kong university. Their stories showed that participants' learning motivations were mediated by learning contexts and self-determination, and that participants highlighted the importance of self-assertion, identity fulfillment as well as instrumental values of English learning in their job seeking in the future. Similarly, Skyrme (2007) explored the different learning experiences of two Chinese international students while entering a New Zealand university. Their learning experiences at a private language school were recorded and analyzed to show how these experiences influenced their university life. The study pointed out that smaller first-year classes

and timely communication with teaching staff would help international students to build up efficient learning strategies.

Li (2004) investigated the experiences of a group of younger Chinese international students when they transferred from a Chinese high school to one in Canada, and from a Canadian high school to a Canadian university. The study showed that students encountered difficulties in their educational, social and cultural adaptation in both transitions, and language proficiency was a major challenge accompanied them throughout their learning experience.

In recording the lived learning experiences of Chinese international students in English speaking countries, all these narrative studies showed that English language proficiency (social and academic) was very challenging and triggered problems in academic studies, communication, socialization, and identity issues. However, no study has been conducted to investigate the test preparation experiences of Chinese international students before they enter a Canadian university, and how these experiences would impact their university learning pathways, and the ways they perceive themselves as international students.

Theoretical Framework

This study has been theoretically informed by sociocultural theories of second language learning, investment, Community of Practice (CoP), imagined identities, and the capital theory. Situating the studying practice of second language learners in a particular social and cultural context, sociocultural understandings of second language learning (Norton, 2010; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Weedon, 2004) emphasize the relationship among individual learners to themselves and to the community with which they engage in their social practices. This view of learning, as articulated in CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), highlights the engagement in, and contribution to, the practices of communities. Lave and Wenger (1991) hold that learning is both a process of cognition and socialization when learning is realized “through centripetal participation in the learning curriculum of the ambient community” (p.100). In CoP, learners are viewed as “legitimate peripheral participants?” (LPP) in the process of their socialization in a given community. Learning would be impossible if learners are not entitled legitimate access to, and direct engagement with, the community of practice. Bourdieu’s (1986,1996) concepts of capital, “sanctuary” and “protective enclave” are borrowed in analyzing the participants’ driving force for coming to Canada for international education.

In this paper, the learning experiences of the three Chinese international students are regarded as a socialization process when participating peripherally in the communities of the IELTS schools, ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms, and in their social lives outside their language learning settings. Their language learning practices are thus examined in the process of engagement or disengagement in their effort to enter different community settings and practices.

Second language learners are people with human agency or investment who actively participate in learning the target language (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2004). Agency is “a relationship that is constantly co-constructed and renegotiated with those around the individual and with society at large” (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p.148). The concept of agency is tied to learner investment and interpreted as the motives that learners demonstrate in language learning to address the relationship between the language learner to the changing social world (Norton, 2000). Norton also pointed out that the learners’ investment in language learning is constantly changing and is implicated in changes of the identities of learners. It is the learners’ investment that allows them to negotiate their relationship within the community, and develop new identities in the process of language learning.

We turn to Bourdieu to understand the complicated factors that constitute the motivations of students in pursuing international sites of learning English. In his theory of capital, Bourdieu (1986) argued that life chances are determined by access to economic, cultural and social capital. Knowledge, linguistic practices, academic qualifications, and credentials are categorized as cultural capital. In particular, academic qualifications may convert into economic capital through the labour market. Bourdieu (1996) also argued that schools outside the mainstream system may become a “sanctuary” to children of middle-class families (p.214). The idea of “sanctuary” was later interpreted as a “protective enclave” by Waters (2008, p.99) when she talked about why middle-class families in Hong Kong sent their children to Canada for higher education. The concepts of “sanctuary” and “protective enclave” are used to analyze the impetus that drive Chinese international students’ international education journey.

Imagination plays a crucial role in the process of imaginative production of identity (Hall, 1990). To Wenger (1998), newcomers may envision their participation in a community beyond the one that they are currently engaged in. Imagination thus becomes “... a process of expanding [their selves] by transcending [their] time and space and creating new images of the world and [themselves]” (p.176). Imagination thus enables newcomers to connect “time and space by extrapolating” their experiences (Norton, 2000, p. 163). Communities in imaginations are desirable because they provide “possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future” (Norton, 2010, p. 355). These theories also informed the decision to use narrative methodology for this study, and a very brief overview follows.

Living the story: Narrative inquiry, the research and researched

As a specific form of discourse, narrative embodies cultural values as well as personal subjectivities (Bruner, 1986; Chase, 2005; Polkinghorne, 1995). Chase (2005) suggests that “in addition to describing what happened, narratives also expresses emotions, thoughts, and interpretations” (p.656). Moreover, narrative is an active process during which the voices of particular narrators are emphasized so that researchers highlight “the version of self, reality, and experience that the storyteller produces through the telling” (Ibid, p.657). The credibility of the stories told by the participants are regarded as the accomplishment of the narrators (Lincoln, 2000). Finally, narratives are socially enabled, confined and situated interactive performances. The specific positioning of each participant, or the narrator, will lead researchers to recognize the particularity of each narrative, through which researchers attend to the relationships among narratives (Lincoln, 2000).

The setting of this study is an IELTS school located in Vancouver, Canada. The first author of this article worked in this school as a part-time IELTS teacher for two years and ease of access to students led to the recruitment of participants from this site. The selected participants had been away from the test preparation school for at least six months, which helped avoid the potential conflicting and possible power relations in the teacher-student relationships the first author had established. The three participants selected for this paper are all female. The students were invited to tell stories about how they experienced English learning and IELTS test preparation in Canada, how their past expectations for international education compared with their current experiences, and how they envisioned their future after completing university studies.

Language choice is a key issue in collecting linguistic autobiographies (Pavlenko, 2007); the same is true with the data discussed here. Since both the participants and the first author are bilingual with Chinese as our first language and English as the second, we used Mandarin Chinese as the language in which data were collected and analyzed. In addition, the English proficiency of the informants was comparatively low and as recommended by Pavlenko (2007),

“where the speakers’ L2 proficiency is low and the L1 is shared with the researcher, the choice of L1 as the language collection is justified” (p.172).

Narratives collected through interviews were transcribed and translated from Mandarin Chinese into English by the first author. Another person, bilingual in Mandarin Chinese and English, was invited to read through both the transcription and the translation of the data to address potential biases and ensure close rendering of the narratives in translation to the original. This person did not know the participants; therefore, his understanding of, and comments on the data allowed for triangulation. All the transcripts were coded for emerging themes. Data transcription, translation and interpretation were carried out in an ongoing and comparative process (Wolcott, 1994). The revealing stories themselves, according to Polkinghorne (2007), bring validity to the story the participants shared in the research.

Language learners from China: Who are they?

The three Chinese international students featured in this paper had been in Vancouver for more than 1.5 years when the study was conducted. All of them transferred to a Chinese IELTS School after spending 2-3 months in ESL schools to prepare for the IELTS test and their application to a Canadian university.

Cindy came to Vancouver without taking the entrance examinations for colleges and universities, or *Gaokao*², in China. She was enrolled in a private college for university transfer (UT), but continued preparing for the IELTS test hoping to get 6.5 and apply directly to university. Similar to Cindy, Joyce did not attend *Gaokao* and was taking university preparatory courses at a local university. Different from Cindy and Joyce, Lily finished her university studies in China and came to Vancouver for graduate studies. She enrolled in a pathways program for conditional admission to a local university but failed, unfortunately.

Learners’ stories

In what follows we relate some of the narratives the participants shared with the first author, where the following general themes emerged: an emphasis on the value of foreign qualifications as capital and English as power, seeking “sanctuary”, comparison between learning at ESL schools and the IELTS School, communication and culture learning, and identity negotiation and transformation. Study participants also reflected on the past expectations and current experiences with regards to learning outcomes at different school settings, approaches to host culture and communication.

Foreign qualifications and English as capital

When talking about the impetus behind their decisions on going abroad for education, all the participants put emphasis on the capital of foreign qualifications and English proficiency in terms of job seeking or securing. As one participant stated:

Now in China many companies require quite a high level of English.... I wanted to improve my English in Canada. In addition, my father doesn’t care too much about my degree. He thinks if I could learn English well that would be good enough. ...I do know that overseas credentials are worth more than Chinese ones. (Joyce)

² The National Higher Education Entrance Examination, or commonly known as *Gaokao*, is an academic examination held annually in the mainland of the People’s Republic of China. This examination is a prerequisite for entrance into almost all higher education institutions at the undergraduate level. It is usually taken by students in their last year of high school.

Lily first denied that she came to Canada because of the capital brought about by Canadian credentials at the beginning of her narrative, but she later contradicted herself, admitting that the knowledge gained from Canada would be more “advanced”.

Cindy’s accounts on the reasons why she came to Canada was a little different. She repeatedly contributed her strong love for English to her decision on pursuing the international education:

I love English. I started learning English...before I went to elementary school. I just liked it. (At that time) I read English stories or sang English songs (for my family and friends). They said I would have a good future because of my English. (Cindy)

Cindy’s own interpretation of her love for English, as we understand it, was at least partially boosted by the comments of her family and friends on how good English could be related to “a good future”.

In their narratives, Cindy, Joyce and Lily all directly or indirectly relate the mastery of English and their future prospect in job market. Their accounts demonstrated that they were consciously or unconsciously motivated by the cultural capital of English and an international credential, and the potential that this capital could be converted into social capital in the future (Bourdieu, 1986).

Sanctuary seeking

In China, a university education markedly increases life chances for the future of students because of the heated competition in society, and in the job market in particular (Davey, De Lian, & Higgins, 2007). A student cannot enroll in any university unless he/she passes *Gaokao*. The failure in *Gaokao* is disastrous to the student and even brings shame to the whole family (Ibid). In such a context, going abroad for higher education becomes a highly desired alternative for many Chinese families. Schools outside the mainstream system, argued Bourdieu (1996), could offer a “sanctuary” to students. Going abroad for international education becomes an option to find a “protective enclave” (Waters, 2008) against competition in China. In speaking of *Gaoko*, Cindy and Joyce expressed their feeling of luck. Cindy said, “[By coming to Canada] I avoided taking part in *Gaokao*, a big disaster to many Chinese students.” And Joyce noted that “I may probably fail in *Gaokao* and felt very lucky I could go to college without taking it here in Canada.”

Though Lily as a university graduate was not bothered by *Gaokao*, she was depressed after two failures in the entrance exam for graduate schools in China. What she implied in the following passage expressed her shared relief with Cindy and Joyce in terms of escape from examinations: “I came here partly because I failed in my enrolment exam for graduate studies twice. I did not need to take tests to come here.”

For all three participants, an international education serves as an escape from the highly competitive and unforgiving educational system in Mainland China. The economic capital of their families enabled them to afford an international credential, which at the same time earned them an elite label in the destination country, a label that has the unintended negative associations and attitudes. Paradoxically, the pursuit of “sanctuary” triggers the increase of the competitiveness in taking standardized English proficiency tests and securing a seat in a preferred university.

Learning at different settings

Cindy, Joyce and Lily shared their English learning experience at ESL school as compared to that at the IELTS School, and their learning outside of school settings.

Learning at ESL schools vs. the IELTS School. All the participants went to ESL schools when they first arrived in Vancouver, and transferred to the same Chinese IELTS School coincidentally. Though at the time of the interviews they were enrolled in different school settings, they continued with their preparation for the IELTS test. All of them maintained that ESL schools were helpful because of native-English-speakers as instructors and the international environment, which encouraged communication in English and therefore was ideal for language improvement.

As Cindy explained, “When I was in the ESL school I could communicate with local teachers and classmates in English....I improved much in my speaking .” Similarly, Joyce noted:

There was not any Chinese student there and I had to communicate in English. I made phenomenal progress during that period of time.... The ESL school focused on general communication...All the teachers were native-English speakers....The international environment is the best for language improvement.

Finally, Lily explained that the ESL school “helps new students to speak English and get used to the English speaking environment.... I made progress there.”

As illustrated by these quotations, the three students enjoyed opportunities to communicate with instructors, the old-timers in the classroom setting. Viewed as “legitimate peripheral participants” (LPP) in ESL schools, they had the opportunity to engage with target language speakers and therefore improved their English.

When it came to the Chinese IELTS School, the participants agreed that studying there helped them improve IELTS writing strategies. However, the Chinese-speaking environment did not encourage English communication and therefore hindered their progress in language learning. As Cindy said, “I improved somehow in reading and writing. I wanted to work on IELTS until I got 6.5 and go to university directly. But I couldn’t make it after spending six months and taking the IELTS test 5 times.” Joyce explained how “[t]he test preparation schoolpreached that their teaching would help us to get ready for our university studies and IELTS test, but I think they were just boastful.” Lily remarked on her similar experiences: “I earned one point in IELTS after learning there. I took the test three times, but I don’t think I achieved my expectations yet. ...Everyone is Chinese in here. The principal, the instructors....except for the Oral English teacher.”

When talking about the impact of learning outcomes at ESL schools and IELTS School, they concurred that neither of the learning outcomes were helpful in terms of their current study. As Cindy said, “I feel what I learned for the IELTS preparation doesn’t help me at all.” Similarly, Joyce noted that although “both schools focused on basic skills.... the former focused more on communications, and the latter on grammar and writing. But when it comes to my study (in the university preparatory program), they both seem helpless.” And Lily lamented that she seemed to “to forget the writing rules for the IELTS test in [her] pathways program.”

The IELTS School and ESL schools are different communities to the participants. The IELTS school was a Chinese community where the participants were “old-timers” or legitimate participants. But this membership was not valued when the aim of learning was for the participants to improve English proficiency. On the contrary, they seemed satisfied with the status of new-comers and the chances to get engaged peripherally in ESL schools. We argue that not all memberships are equal; it is the community that issues the membership that counts. However, neither of the settings prepared the participants for the discipline-specific academic genres they need in university. Furthermore, all participants took IELTS tests multiple times and test taking in this sense not only cost the participants’ time and money, but became a gamble in

terms of uncertain outcomes.

Communication and culture learning: Learning in the community at large. It is generally agreed that practicing the target language is pivotal to learners of second languages, and language learners will benefit from authentic communicative activities in the target language. Cultural learning is considered an indispensable part of target language learning.

On their journey of international education, Cindy, Joyce and Lily expressed their strong desire for communication engagement and cultural acquisition while learning English. Unfortunately, they all found that they could not get access to such opportunities. Their shared experiences demonstrate that as newcomers to the local community, they lacked opportunities to participate even peripherally in the community of practice. Cindy said, “I think I need to communicate with local people in order to improve my speaking and English proficiency. I need to understand this country and its culture. I have no way to enter the local English environment.” Joyce also noted that “[t]he ideal is to communicate with native English speakers....It is not very practical however. On the same topic, Lily explained:

I think I'm here to approach the society and acquire the essence of Western culture. I think...the most important of all is to improve my English. I haven't achieved the level that I can communicate with local people freely....When they find out that you can't communicate with them...they may give up communicating with you....and think you fail their expectation in terms of communication.

Cultural learning facilitates linguistic competence development and enhances effective communication between language learners and target language speakers. The responses, attitudes, and feelings that second language learners develop towards the target language and culture may considerably affect their learning outcome (Seliger, 1988). In this study, the participants unanimously expressed their strong desire to communicate with native English speakers in the host society, hoping to improve their language proficiency and understand the culture deeper. All participants found that they were neither perceived as legitimate in communicating with local people nor granted such chances. Feeling discouraged and confused, they put the blame on their own lower proficiency of English. Unfortunately they did not realize that in a society where the expectation is that you will speak “good” English as defined by the dominant group, anyone who does not speak “good” English is then positioned as deficient not only in language but in other ways. Lily's self-blaming is an example of how she internalized the dominant idea that newcomers should take up the responsibility of integration to the local society. The unequal power relations between the three international students and native English speakers, we argue, is the root why the participants could not access the local community to improve their English.

Past expectations and current experiences: Identity negotiation and transformation

Cindy, Joyce and Lily shared with us what they envisioned for the education they would receive in Canada while in China. They all took it for granted that English learning would be fast and easy in an English-speaking environment. However, the time they spent on English was much longer than they expected. As Cindy explained:

I didn't expect that I would take one year learning English. I thought I would make very rapid progress in English...[because] I would be in an English environment. I wouldn't have any problem in language since I had to communicate with English-speakers. But it turns out language is my biggest headache.

Joyce had a similar experience, noting that: “In China everyone would say it would be so easy to study (language and majors) abroad. Then I found ...if your English is good...the study is simple and easy. But my problem is that my English is poor.” And Lily recalled that “ [m]any Chinese think that when you’re in Canada, you’ll be naturally immersed in English and your English would be improved.... but you know what, I’ve been doing that in the past 1.5 years.”

If they were talking about their disillusionment with English learning in general, they were greatly disappointed at their repeated failures in the IELTS tests. Cindy took the test 5 times, Joyce 3 times, and Lily 6 times. Failure in the English proficiency tests, accompanied by the feeling that they could not communicate with local community, bring much uncertainty to their future plans and force them to make changes accordingly. Cindy said, “I was just so naïve then....I planned to live here after I got my degree, but now I [have] changed my mind and plan to go back.” And Joyce noted: “I hoped that I could find a job and worked here for a couple of years. Now I prefer to go back after graduation.”

In Lily’s case, she would fulfill her parents’ desire to apply for immigration after graduation, and would return to China in the future. She explained:

Before I came I just wanted to get my degree and work here for a while, and go back with Canadian working experiences. Now I still want to get my degree, and find a job here. What is different is that I plan to apply for immigration. My parents want me to do that.... I will go back to China sooner or later.

Though different in their future planning after earning their degrees, Cindy, Joyce, and Lily all envisioned a bright future that the Canadian education would grant them. To achieve their individual goals, they invested heavily to improve their English by attending ESL schools, the IELTS School, and entering the local community. However, they did not realize their previous expectations. Feeling disappointed and lost, they began to question their choice of coming to Canada, which seems to us is the demonstration of their “desire for meaning and coherence” (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2003, p. 18) when their self-perceptions were changing on their journey of international education. As Cindy explained, “It’s so hard. Everything is hard. The test, the study, and my living here. Even harder than *Gaokao*. So why am I here? And I can’t escape and go back home.” Lily felt the same way: “I feel like....my dream broke. (Life here) is different. But I have to go on with my studies... for different goals....Or I’m a different person?” Cindy doubted her decision to come to Canada when her sanctuary seeking turned out to be a harder route than writing the *Gaokao* in China. Lily regarded herself as a different person when her dream broke. The sense of loss and uncertainty were prominent in their stories.

All the participants embarked on a journey of international education with imagined identities: fluent English speakers, successful university students, owners of Canadian credentials, and employees in Canadian job market. They secretly “connected themselves to the potential memberships in imagined communities” (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007, p. 670) before they came to Canada. When they found these expected identities were remote because of the challenges in language learning, their future became unpredictable.

Implications

The narratives of the three participants showed that they took on international education as a strategy to gain the capital of foreign qualifications, increase their power of English, and pursue “sanctuary” from competitive examinations in their home countries. At different school settings they achieved unsatisfactory learning outcomes which was not preparing them for the academic studies at colleges or universities. However, the scant opportunities for them to interact with

native English speakers not only denied them direct involvement in practice, but also raised their doubt about their access to legitimate participation in the community of target language speakers. They were given “intentional instruction” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.41) at both ESL schools and the IELTS School, but not the chance to practice their classroom knowledge in the “community at large in terms of possibilities for developing identities of mastery” (Ibid). In other words, they were not granted chances to transform their status of learners to participants with legitimacy.

During the learning process, there were vast differences between their expectations for international education in Canada, their current learning experiences, and imagined futures. When their imagined identities as fluent English speakers and undergraduate students did not materialize, they changed their plans. Additionally, we could also see shifts in their perceptions of their own positions. They were the ‘lucky’ ones and elites who could afford to seek escape from the potential failure in *Gaokao* in China and they enjoyed membership in the IELTS School and became peripheral participants in ESL Schools. However, as non-native English speakers they were unable to engage in the practices of local communities out of school. The sense of loss and uncertainty that prevailed in their narratives extended in tension throughout the learning journey.

Several concerns derived from the study remain unaddressed and therefore call for further consideration and investigation. What is the discourse that fosters the idea among Chinese people, of simpler and easier higher education in countries outside of China? The interview participants seemed to come to Canada with the belief that it would be a natural and easy process once they were in an English-speaking country. None of them anticipated that their seeming success in escaping from examinations in China was just temporary; they were under great pressure of standardized English tests instead.

We also doubt the meaning and fairness of standardized tests in assessing the language abilities of the test takers if the tests are not helpful for their academic studies at college or university. How can the heavy investment our participants made be justified given the repeated failures they suffered in taking tests, and the subsequent disappointment in being unable to become ‘good’ in English? Though we acknowledge that to completely abandon testing is not feasible, we argue that the practices and procedures of language assessment as default gate-keeper need critical examination in view of the outcomes.

The participants in this study seemed to position themselves as inferior to local people because of their English proficiency, and internalized the idea that English competency was the marker of their identity. They did not realize that language could also become a site where they resist identities assigned to them as international students and test takers, and bring the diversity of their own languages, cultures and community allegiance (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2003). This study confirms other recommendations that the university and instructors should consider implementing emancipatory curriculum and pedagogy in order to empower international students on campus (Beck, Ilieva, Scholefield & Waterstone, 2007; Kim, 2012).

Conclusion

The rich data generated from the narrative study on the three Chinese international students not only tells the stories of the three participants as language learners, but also elicits our profound reflections on the (in)accessibility of legitimate participation in the communities of practice in host nations of international education. In this paper, we illustrated some of the many challenges faced by the featured students, their expectations and dreams of an international education, and their responses to the reality of their experiences. They are shaped into a new identity as ‘test-takers’ that reflect their success or failure, and this becomes the main, largely negative, experience of international education. The perceived program of ‘refuge’ became another site of

oppression and hardship.

The lived stories of the participants depict them as individual learners embedded in shifting social and cultural contexts, and their learning activities are the consequence of social practices in different communities. As demonstrated in the personal narratives presented, international students are not a nameless group reduced to unfavorable stereotypes; rather, they are real people with specific social, cultural, and historical backgrounds. We hope that university administrators, and policy makers, instructional and student services staff take the complexities of international students' learning experiences into consideration in policy-making and classroom teaching to better assist the students that we welcome to our institutions in their personal and academic development in Canadian universities.

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