

INVESTMENT IN ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION LEARNING: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS IN MAINLAND CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Learning English has a significant positive impact on China's growth, especially in light of the country's recent three decades of reform and opening-up policies. The standard for Chinese students' English pronunciation to be comprehensible is higher since English pronunciation is crucial for communication. However, English pronunciation is still a challenge for English major students. This article reports on multiple case studies of three Chinese English major students' lived experiences of English pronunciation investments across different contexts, including inside and outside the classroom. The study adopts a qualitative research approach where multiple data sources such as semi-structured in-depth interviews with the participants; classroom observations, diaries, and documents, yielded thick descriptions of participants' English pronunciation learning. The interview data was transcribed and then analyzed using N-Vivo 12. The results showed that students with varying levels of English pronunciation competency held two different opinions about English pronunciation, influencing their varied investments in English pronunciation in various circumstances. Norton's concept of investment informed these conclusions. Meanwhile, personal agency responding to particular contextual situations also impacts their strategic L2 investments. This article calls for the importance of a holistic understanding of students' English pronunciation learning in and out of the classroom for an in-depth understanding of the complexities of learners varied English pronunciation investments.

Keywords: Capital; English pronunciation learning; identity; investment

ABSTRAK

Pembelajaran bahasa Inggeris mempunyai kesan positif yang ketara terhadap pertumbuhan negara China, hasil daripada dasar reformasi dan pembukaan negara selama tiga dekad kebelakangan ini. Standard untuk sebutan bahasa Inggeris pelajar China difahami kini adalah lebih tinggi disebabkan sebutan bahasa Inggeris adalah amat penting untuk komunikasi. Walau bagaimanapun, sebutan bahasa Inggeris masih menjadi cabaran bagi pelajar jurusan utama bahasa Inggeris. Artikel ini melaporkan beberapa kajian kes pengalaman hidup tiga orang pelajar jurusan bahasa Inggeris dari negara China mengenai pelaburan sebutan bahasa Inggeris merentas konteks yang berbeza, termasuk di dalam dan di luar bilik darjah. Kaedah penyelidikan kualitatif telah digunakan dalam kajian ini dengan pelbagai sumber data telah dikumpulkan seperti temu bual separa berstruktur mendalam dengan peserta kajian; pemerhatian bilik darjah, buku harian atau diari, dan dokumen menghasilkan penerangan yang tebal dan terperinci tentang pembelajaran sebutan bahasa Inggeris peserta kajian. Data yang terkumpul kemudian ditranskripsikan dan kemudian dianalisis menggunakan N-Vivo 12. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa pelajar dengan tahap kemahiran sebutan bahasa Inggeris yang tidak sama mempunyai dua pandangan yang berbeza tentang sebutan bahasa Inggeris. Ianya mempengaruhi pelaburan dengan cara mereka tersendiri dalam sebutan bahasa Inggeris dalam pelbagai keadaan. Sementara itu, agensi peribadi sebagai tindak balas kepada situasi kontekstual tertentu juga memberi kesan kepada pelaburan L2 strategik mereka. Kesimpulan ini dipengaruhi oleh konsep pelaburan yang diperkenalkan oleh Norton. Artikel ini menekankan kepentingan pemahaman holistik terhadap pembelajaran sebutan bahasa Inggeris pelajar di dalam dan di luar bilik darjah untuk memahami dengan lebih mendalam kompleksiti pelaburan sebutan bahasa Inggeris yang pelbagai bagi para pelajar.

Kata kunci: Identiti; modal; pelaburan; pembelajaran sebutan bahasa Inggeris

1.0 INTRODUCTION

With the implementation of China's reform and opening-up policy in the past three decades, foreign language education, especially English learning, has contributed significantly to China's future development (Gilakjani, 2016). As a result, there is an increasing need for Chinese students to be more proficient in English, particularly for English majors, who have stronger criteria for basic English ability. In 2000, the Chinese Ministry of Education (CMoE) promulgated the English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors in Colleges and Universities (hereafter refer to the syllabus 2000), which puts forward different requirements for pronunciation teaching and learning in each semester through four academic years. However,

several recent studies have shown that most Chinese English major students have many problems with their pronunciation and are unable to meet the requirements of the syllabus (Zhang, 2019; Pang & Gao, 2020).

According to Gilakjani (2016), mastering English pronunciation is not only significant but also complex as well as difficult. Good English pronunciation is a key element in expressing yourself to others intelligibly while poor pronunciation leads to bad communication skills (Cavus & Ibrahim, 2017). Numerous studies have been conducted worldwide exploring individual differences in motivation in English pronunciation learning (Ploquin, 2020; Baran-Łucarz, 2017; Shafiee Rad & Roohani, 2024). These studies reveal that language learners are thought to have stable, unchanging personalities. Nevertheless, Darwin and Norton (2015) proposed that it would be more beneficial to ask, "To what extent are students invested in the language and literacy practices of a given classroom and community?" rather than, "Are students motivated to learn a language?". They also questioned the psychological structure of motivation, which ignores how social aspects and structures influence an individual's academic performance (Mona & Rodríguez, 2017).

What does investment in learning refer to? According to Norton (2015), investment is the active use of symbolic and material resources by language learners in the language learning process to increase the value of their cultural and material capital. In addition to learning a language for educational purposes, individuals who acquire a foreign language want to establish their intellectual and social standing which symbolizes capital. Norton (2015) views learning investment as structurally dependent on three crossing aspects; identity, ideology, and capital. Although there has been a surge in research employing this concept in a variety of circumstances in the last twenty years (Darvin & Norton, 2015), those studies generally focus on the investment in English as a whole. There are limited studies that explore investment in specific language skills such as English pronunciation learning.

English pronunciation is not only related to English listening and speaking (Cavus & Ibrahim, 2017) but is also concerned with the learner's identity construction (Müller, 2011; Huang & Hashim, 2021, Kong & Kang, 2022). This means that English pronunciation acquisition is a psychological as well as a socio-cultural process. To fill such a void in the literature, this paper reports on a multiple case study of the lived experiences of Chinese undergraduate students majoring in English while learning English pronunciation, both inside and outside of their classrooms in a Chinese university. It aims to offer insights into the

complexity of English pronunciation learning investment by achieving a holistic understanding of the participants' English pronunciation learning experiences across contexts, offering some pedagogy implications for English education policymakers and teachers. Based on these objectives, the following question was formulated:

- a. What are the English major students' views towards learning English pronunciation?
- b. How do English major students' views influence their English pronunciation investment?

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF STUDY

2.1 Investment and Identity

Motivation is essentially a psychological construct that focuses on conscious and unconscious elements, while investment is primarily sociological and is shaped by histories, lived experiences, and social practices. Although a language learner can be highly motivated, he or she may not invest in the language practices in the classroom. Consequently, the learner's investment in the language practices of the classroom can be compromised if the learner's conception of good language is not consistent with that of the teacher. In her research that investigates motivation, Norton (1995) is of the view that the term "investment" refers to a change from the prevalent cognitive psychological approaches to a more sociocultural one that highlights the intricate connection between language learner identity and language learning commitment in the context of second language acquisition. It questions the idea that motivation is a binary, static, and unitary construct (e.g., that someone is either motivated or uninspired); instead, it takes a more fluid, dynamic, and situated perspective on language learners as socially and historically created people with a variety of goals and identities. According to Block (2003) and Norton (2013), this social turn encourages investigating the identities of language learners that essentially vary in time and space and may coexist in contradictory ways within a single individual. More noteworthy, an essential element of identity formation is "agency," which enables a person to perceive individuals as intentional beings. Van Lier (2010) points out that such agency includes initiative, intentionality, control, self-regulation, and self-efficacy. However, it is also critical to recognize the contextual limitations on participants' exercise of agency in investing in acquiring English pronunciation, since agency was by no means "socially unfettered free will" (Ahearn, 2001).

2.2 Investment and Capital

The concept of investment is closely related to the metaphor of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1977). Learners who invest in learning a second language understand that this can provide

them with symbolic resources (such as education, reputation, and social networks) and material resources (such as money, and real estate). These resources include learners' social and economic capital, which in turn increases the value of their cultural capital, such as knowledge, credentials, and thinking mode (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Norton (2013) notes that learners 'expect or hope to have a good return on that investment—a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources' (p.50). To finally become whomever they want to be, this motivates students to use their agentive capacity to obtain maximal access to symbolic and material resources in confined environments (Hajar, 2017; Lamb, 2013).

2.3 Investment and Imagined Identity

The imagined communities that language learners aspire to during the learning process may be the best way to understand individuals' investment (Anderson, 1991; Wenger, 1998). An imagined community is "a group of people, not immediately tangible and approachable, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination" (Norton, 2013). The prior experience of the learners as well as the numerous communities they are currently involved in are the foundations of this power. These imagined communities can be native speakers of the target language that learners encounter in real life, such as English-speaking teachers. They may also be proficient L2 speakers who are content with their college experience or who are doing well at work. According to Norton (2013) and Pavlenko and Norton (2007), learners may form imagined identities and a sense of belonging in these communities, which may have a significant impact on their investments. By drawing on the construction of identity, capital, and imagined identity, this paper tries to answer the research questions.

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

With the emergence of the concept of investment, a large number of related studies have appeared in both second-language and foreign-language environments. For instance, some studies have focused on the relationship between investment and identity (Skapoulli, 2004; Shi & Guo, 2021; Shahidzade & Mazdayasna, 2022). Some studies explored the relationship between learners' investment and specific language resources in multiple language learning contexts (Babino & Steward, 2017; Thapa, 2019; Massó & De Costa, 2023). Moreover, a great deal of studies focus on the relationship between investment and imagined identity (Sung, 2019; Wang & Jiang, 2024; Huang & Hashim, 2021; Kong & Kang, 2022). It can be seen from the above literature review that almost all investment research focuses on overall English learning. There is a lack of studies conducted on the acquisition of English pronunciation and

other skills related to English learning, which warrants further investigation.

4.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

4.1 Participants

This article presents part of the findings of a larger Ph.D multiple case study research report. In this study, a qualitative research approach was utilized. The participants were selected via purposive sampling. The selection criterion is their different language proficiency and academic background, which are two key factors that shape their different investments (Norton, 2015; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Both Palinkas et al. (2015) and Creswell (1994) have maintained that a small sampling size of not more than four cases is ideal. According to them, there is a larger propensity to compromise on the nuance of interpretation if more cases are studied. Thus, only three participants were selected for this study from different English pronunciation proficiency with various academic backgrounds. Table 4.1 summarizes the demographic information of the participants. To maintain anonymity, participants' true identities have been substituted with pseudonyms.

Table 1. Participants' demographic information

Name	Age	Major	Pronunciation proficiency	Grade	Background
Chen	19	English Education	High level	Freshman	Saleswomen
Ping	21	English Translation	Middle level	Sophomore	workers
Lan	21	English Business	Low level	Sophomore	Businessmen

4.2 Data Collection

The multiple data collection methods in this study were semi-structured interviews (STL), classroom observation (CO), participants' diaries (D), and documents. All the data were recorded to better compare and triangulate different sources to make the findings and interpretation credible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The data were collected between March to June 2022. During the data collection process, the researcher maintained regular communication with the participants via email and phone calls. Although these data are not used for analysis, they increase the credibility of the stories that the participants share.

4.3 Data Analysis

The process of data analysis was iterative and dynamic, entailing several (re)readings of data collected from diverse sources (Patton, 2023). The interview material was translated into English after being verbatim transcribed. The translations from Mandarin to English were sent to the participants for verification and to authenticate the data. After that, they were encoded with the help of NVivo 12 software and analyzed using a paradigm analysis program to generate taxonomies and categories from common elements throughout the database (Polkinghorn, 1995). To confirm the emergent findings, major themes from the interviews were identified and triangulated with other data. The recurrent themes and patterns found in the analysis were further examined in light of the theoretical framework. Finally, following a member-checking process, summaries of the initial findings were sent back to the participants for their feedback (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

5.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following discusses Chen's case study where she shares her views on the necessity of English pronunciation, her role as an active English pronunciation learner in the classroom, her autonomous English pronunciation activities out of the classroom, her perceived difficulties establishing relationships with other exchange students at the university, and finally her perceived power relations that affected her investment in a foreign language.

5.1 Case Chen

5.1.1 Necessity of English Pronunciation

Chen was born and grew up in Guizhou's provincial capital, Guiyang. Compared to her peers who came from rural areas, she had access to more English pronunciation learning resources. For example, since her primary school days, she has started learning English in extracurricular training institutions like 'CC English' and 'Susan English'. The teachers in these institutions focused on cultivating learners' English communicative ability, so a great amount of time was spent on English pronunciation skills. These experiences prompted Chen to realize the role of English pronunciation in listening and speaking. When asked about her experiences in learning English pronunciation in an English training institution, Chen replied:

"I remembered that my mother sent me to 'CC English' and 'Susan English'. These training institutions paid more attention to communication skills. The teachers were responsible. In order to improve our listening and speaking skills,

they spent time on explaining phonetic knowledge to us."(CIT1-890-894)

In addition, Chen has also seen a lot of movies, watched Tiktok videos, sung in English, and practiced translating short videos into English since she was very little. These audio and video recordings made her realize the role of English pronunciation in shaping characters. It has also inspired her to be a singer like Taylor Swift or an English blogger and actress like Cardi B who shares cultural differences around the world. In short, these off-campus training institutions and informal learning experiences not only made her realize the role of English pronunciation in improving communication skills, but also enabled her to achieve her imagined identity. The following interview excerpt illustrates Chen's future plans and reveals her imagined identity:

"I want to be a famous singer like Taylor Swift. I also want to be an English actor and blogger like Cardi B. I have done some English dubbing exercises to imitate various characters. It made me know that if i want to achieve my dreams, I have to figure out what tone and intonation I should apply to best portray a character, and express emotions and personalities in different contexts." (CIT2-557-578)

5.1.2 A Strategic Active English Pronunciation Learner in Class

Based on the researcher's observation in the Spoken English session, limited concrete and direct activities were carried out which was related to English pronunciation learning. In one of these activities, the foreign teacher assigned pair work and topic discussion to foster students' social skills and abilities. During the pair work, Chen helped correct her classmates' poor pronunciation concerning single words. However, for the topic discussion, Chen purposely chose classmates who have good pronunciation skills to help her improve and practice her fluency. It would appear that Chen has adopted strategic investment to help her improve her fluency and skills in English pronunciation. Her response when asked to evaluate her performance during the Spoken English class is as follows:

"In terms of the topic discussion activity, I would like to ask Zengqiao whose English pronunciation is good enough to start a sudden conversation. I think she is be able to accept challenges and we two can talk fluently and learn from each other. However, if it is a simple pair work activity, I will finish it with Yaoyao who needs me to do some pronunciation correction. I will choose different partners based on the difficulty of the activity." (CESCSt/1-303-328)

Chen believed that the foreign teacher lacked an understanding of the needs of Chinese students. She believed that some of the activities were worthless as they were too just straightforward question-and-answer sessions. The teacher did not provide any feedback or comments on students' assignments. Rather, the teacher was just intent on completing his teaching task. Chen admitted that she had shared her opinion with the teacher and suggested that students should be given more freedom to speak more rather than participate in uncreative activities. The next excerpt illustrates why Chen was unwilling to take part and her unhappiness is reflected as follows:

“Our foreign teacher was not easy to get along with and his instruction was always boring, without creativity. He didn't know much about our needs and some activities are often too simple to participate in.” (CSECStIT2-90-93)

In another observation during the English listening and speaking class, the researcher noticed that, except for one class, there was also very little guidance on English pronunciation. Chen participated actively during the listening and speaking class when phonetic knowledge was included and listened intently to the teacher's instructions during this class. She raised her hand to illustrate and accepted the teacher's suggestions when the teacher discussed the differences between stressed and unstressed words in phrases. Chen's investment in suprasegmental feature learning during her English Listening and Speaking class is illustrated below. The words in bold indicate the stressed syllable.

*“Teacher: let's look at the sentence. **Chang** was **feeling very unhappy** because a **friend** had **died**. The bold parts should be read loader and more clearly than other parts. Understand?*

Students: Yes.

Teacher: Any volunteers read for us?

Chen: I want to have a try (hands up).

Teacher: okay.

*Chen: **Chang** was **feeling very unhappy** because a friend had died.*

Teacher: a friend had died. Only the bold parts should be read stronger, and the other parts could be read weaker. Read again.

*Chen: **Chang** was **feeling very unhappy** because a friend had **died**.*

Teacher: Good. Sit down please.” (CELSFN - 5 -15)

During the class break, Chen approached the teacher to seek advice and to clarify her

weaknesses. The teacher explained that some phonetic phonemes in the words she pronounced were too strong. The teacher explained when Americans speak, their pronunciation is not so strong and some phonemes are weakly pronounced. Besides, the teacher advised her to focus on details such as the link between the former letter and the latter letter in a word. If these details are ignored, the teacher told Chen that it would be useless to imitate the pronunciation even though they are repeated many times. When asked why she went to the teacher during the class interval, Chen replied:

“I wanted to ask her what can be done about the difficulties that trouble me, and then she asked me to read the sentences. After I read the sentences, she told me that some of phonemes in the words were read too strong. The native speaker usually didn't pronounce as clearly as ours. They would omit some pronunciation. Then she said that I should pay more attention to these details. For example, how to connect the pronunciation of the last letter with the next letter. Otherwise, it was useless to imitate it even more than ten times.”
(CELSStI-446-452)

5.1.3 An Autonomous English Pronunciation Learners out of Classroom

Outside of the classroom and in her daily activities, Chen invested in English pronunciation with multiple strategies like singing English songs, doing English dubbing, and searching on the internet. For example, Chen often sang English songs to improve her pronunciation. Aiming to interpret the theme expressed in the song, she kept practicing the lyrics, listening to how the singer dealt with the liaison in the words and sentences, and certain phoneme sounds of the single words. For example, one day, when she rehearsed the song "Brave" to express the loss and despair conveyed, she listened to the original song, again and again to master how to sing each word and sentence. In Chen's diary (CD), she described the experience of learning and singing this song in detail as follows:

“Before I sang this song, I would practice the lyrics again and again, and listen to how the singers sang and how they dealt with the liaison between words and sentences. My problem about this song was that the last word **brave** in the sentence was ***I want to see you be brave***. I pronounced the ***ave*** as ***le/*** sound. But if I pronounced it out loud, it would sound very sharp and unstable. Through trial and error, I replaced it with the ***lei/*** sound. Then, the quality of my pronunciation improved, and the whole sentence sounded clear and stable. This

experience enlightened me to pay more attention to the pronunciation of some phonemes in the words when I couldn't sing English songs well in the future.”
(*CD-11-18-April-14*)

5.1.4 Perceived Difficulties in Establishing Social Relationships with Exchange Studies on Campus

Although Chen invested in English pronunciation with multiple strategies, the lack of opportunities to interact with advanced English speaker learners bothered her. She is an extrovert and a social learner who is eager to communicate with other advanced learner like foreign students at the university to improve her English pronunciation. However, the university could not provide any space for free interaction between the local and foreign students. Her frustrations are reflected as follows:

“I couldn't find a partner with good pronunciation to communicate with. I preferred to communicate with international students, especially native speaker students. However, our foreign language faculty seemed to have no English corner to provide us with opportunities to communicate with them. Hence, I let it go.” (*CIT4-140-145*)

5.1.5 Unfair Power Relations Affected Investment in English Pronunciation

Chen feels that her efforts to improve her English communication skills are hampered by her surrounding environment. She believes that the influence of long-term exam-oriented education does not encourage oral communication. In addition, few students around her were willing to communicate in English with her. Whenever she took the initiative to communicate with her classmates in English, they satirized her for deliberately showing off her perceived English prowess. She shared her frustrations as follows:

“Interviewer: Do you practice oral English in the daily life?”

Chen: No. You know, sometimes when i speak English with them, some classmates would think I was showing off. I don't want to continue anymore.”
(*CIT4-437-442*)

5.2 Case Ping

Ping comes from a low-income family. Her parents are migrant workers who travel to other parts of the country to earn a better living. She has experienced a hard life as her parents were mostly away. Her dream is to become an English teacher to help share her parent's financial burden and help provide for her family better.

5.2.1 Necessity of English Pronunciation

Following her teacher's suggestion, Ping managed to enter university despite fierce competition to be an English teacher. Based on her observation, Ping noticed that employers are now requiring English teachers to pronounce words correctly in English. She started to worry that her bad pronunciation might make her less employable in the future. Thus, she decided that it is necessary to invest in English pronunciation learning. She shared her thoughts as follows:

“If I want to be a teacher, there will be a face interview. As soon as I speak, the employer will judge my pronunciation. If my pronunciation were not good, people would think that my comprehensive English was poor. I get rejected easily during interviews.” (PIT2-138-142)

5.2.2 A Receiver from the English Translation Teacher in the Classroom

In the Tourism Translation class, it was observed that the lessons were mostly occupied with the teachers' translation skills and exercises, specifically Chinese-to-English translation and English-to-Chinese translation. The teacher spent a considerable amount of time translating but allowed only ten minutes for students to make their oral presentations. Two students took turns to present their report on any topic that they were interested in. During these presentations, Ping did not seem to pay much attention to her classmates' oral reports, preferring to browse the web pages on her mobile phone. However, as soon as the teacher started making remarks about how the students were pronouncing words in English, Ping straightened up and focused on what the teacher was saying. When probed during the interview on why she did not seem interested in her classmates' presentations, Ping replied that she knew that their pronunciation was poor. However, she believed that her teacher's remarks regarding her classmates' pronunciation were accurate and may aid in her acquisition of English phonetic knowledge. The following interview illustrates this;

“What they shared I was so familiar with, and I thought their pronunciation was not standard. Ms. Yan would correct their English pronunciation errors, and I could get to know what I should focus on. I thought it was a fast way to catch my attention and improve.” (PTTStIT1-70-78)

5.2.3 An Autonomous Segmental Learner Out of the Classroom

Outside of the classroom, Ping sometimes performed the Test for English Majors (TEM-4)'s English dictation task. She enjoyed studying pronunciation in the dictation assignments, even if her main objective was to practice listening skills and hope to increase listening scores in the written examination. She would typically select a five-to-ten-minute piece, for instance, from the "XueXiQiangGuo" program, listen to it, take notes on each sentence, and look up the pronunciation of any words she could not recognize and was unsure of. Moreover, Ping asserted that although she was aware that strong forms, weak forms, or liaisons made it more difficult for her to listen and mimic, her attention was directed toward pronouncing words correctly rather than sentences. In Ping's diary (PD), she described the way to remember the pronunciation of many words.

“This afternoon, I dictated a short article about "Sanjiangyuan National Park" through the "XueXiQiangGuo" software in my dormitory. In the dictation process, if I didn't understand some words and sentences after listening to them several times, I would read the original text directly, then write down the words I didn't understand, check their phonetic symbols in the dictionary, and finally read along with the video. For example, I misheard stone /stəʊn/ as /snəʊn/, and pool /pəʊl/ as /pu:l.” (PD-1-7-April-2)

In addition, Ping also continued to read for about 20 minutes every day, Sunday through Thursday, following the Voice of America (VOA) news channel, Special English to improve her sense and fluency of the language. She liked to read quietly in her dormitory room after the VOA since she felt free there and no one would criticize her pronunciation. She also felt at ease with GA fluidity and attempted to mimic it without making any mistakes, but she never held herself responsible for her inability to read aloud with the same accuracy as the audio. In her journal. She wrote:

“In the dormitory, I randomly selected an article on the VOA homepage to imitate. The theme of the article was "Teachers Use Games for More Enjoyable

Learning". In the course of reading aloud, I only required myself to master the pronunciation of words but never cared whether there was explosion, liaison, or intonation or not in the sentences, because I thought that if I insisted on reading after VOA for about 20 minutes every day, my pronunciation would improve. Although the speed was very slow, I was not in a hurry. It was a relaxed way for my roommates to never judge my pronunciation, good or bad, cultivating my sense of language in a comfortable and relaxed state." (*PD-2-10-April-11*)

5.2.4 A Poor Learner in English Phonetic Suprasegmental Features

Ping was clueless when it came to supra-segmental phonetic expertise. She revealed that her lack of systematic phonological understanding was caused by the English phonetic course's inadequate coverage of phonetic concepts in its first semester. Hence, she just focused on segmental features. Ping admitted that she was unable to come up with a solution for her difficulties with word stress and other suprasegmental features. She wrote the following in her diary:

"Be honest, I don't have systematic English phonetic knowledge and have no idea what the specific problem was with my pronunciation, and I didn't have any idea how to deal with other English phonetic knowledge except segmental features." (*PD-35-April-9*)

5.2.5 Written-Examination Culture

In China, learning English involves a lot of written tests. Since high-stakes tests like China's College English Test, CET-4 and CET-8 did not measure English pronunciation, her teachers and classmates stopped emphasizing English pronunciation acquisition during her sophomore years. During her interview, Ping stated that she would follow the trend and dedicate more time to exam-related activities in an environment where exam culture is common. This would make it challenging and pointless to focus on learning English pronunciation, let alone super-segmental knowledge. The following interview excerpt illustrates this:

“If my classmates around me have been studying hard, they would motivate me to learn. But if they were lazy, I wasn’t motivated. Now everyone is preparing for the TEM-4, and there is no English phonetic course involved so I don’t have higher requirements on myself to overcome pronunciation difficulties, and I feel that it is almost enough to grasp the pronunciation of words.” (*PIT3-520-527*)

5.3 Case Lan

Lan’s family runs their own small business to support the family. As a result of her familial environment, Lan does not believe working in an English-related field is required. Like her parents, she feels capable of handling self-supporting commercial ventures. Lan is not as driven as the other two students to become fluent in English. However, she does have a personal attitude toward being good at whatever she does.

5.3.1 Cinderella

With regards to mastering English pronunciation, most times it is disregarded or handled like a Cinderella because it is not examined in the written exam. As a result, Lan admitted in the interview that she has been focusing all of her efforts and energy on developing her written test skills, such as grammar and vocabulary from elementary school until senior high school. Despite the university’s first-year phonetic teacher explaining to them the importance of pronunciation in speaking and listening, Lan firmly believes that English pronunciation remains unimportant. As mentioned earlier, pronunciation is not required for high-stakes exams like TEM-4 and TEM-8, which are important for students majoring in English. Lan explained as follows:

“It could be ignored. The examinations focused on written knowledge since we started to learn English. Even the TEM-4 and TEM-8 exams for English majors do not test pronunciation. If the vocabulary is not enough or the grammar is not up to standard, it will be very troublesome to pass these exams. However, if it’s just poor pronunciation, it won’t cause any negative influence on written examinations.” (*LIT2-478-480*)

Lan’s career decision was largely unaffected by the proficiency of her English pronunciation. In contrast to her peers who aspire to pursue careers in English, Lan was open-minded about her future employment. She might work in education or in a profession that does not require a lot of English. If she had to choose, she would become an English teacher in a junior or

senior high school, where the emphasis would be more on written exam abilities like grammar and vocabulary rather than pronunciation. Lan explained as follows:

“I don't want to be a (English) teacher. Even if I have to be a teacher, I don't want to be a primary school teacher. The pronunciation requirement for a primary school teacher is strict. Maybe I will be a junior high or senior high school teacher who focuses on the written examination rather than pronunciation.” (*LIT1-1254-1271*)

5.3.2 An Occasion Learner of English Pronunciation in the Class

During the English Listening and Speaking class, the teacher was observed paying more attention to the listening exercises in the book as required in the syllabus. In Lan's case, the scarce error correction activity helped her to acquire the pronunciation of words in English. For example, in the fill-in-the-blanks exercise, the teacher had a female student read out her responses to the questions. When she mispronounced the words, the teacher corrected her and made her repeat the words. This caused some uneasiness and a tense atmosphere in the classroom environment. Lan was observed paying close attention to the teacher's corrections and noted her advice and guidance on ways to avoid making the same mistakes. When asked how she evaluated this activity, Lan replied as follows:

“I thought it could attract our attention to pronunciation. I felt embarrassed (for the girl) at that time. The teacher corrected her pronunciation when she read each word. After the teacher corrected it, I checked whether it was different from my pronunciation. Next time, I would rather read it slowly, but I wanted to be as correct as possible.” (*LELSSIT1-364-375*)

5.3.3 An Exaltation-Machine out of Class

Based on the researcher's guidelines, to vividly describe her extracurricular English pronunciation investment, she recorded her English pronunciation learning behaviors in a diary. In general, Lan didn't invest much effort and energy in English pronunciation but fully devoted herself to the written TEM-4 examination. For instance, in daily life, she used the MaiMemo app to assist her in memorizing vocabulary. When she encountered unfamiliar words, she would incidentally look up how these words were pronounced. In her diary, Lan wrote as follows:

“Today, as usual, I recited words with the app MaiMemo. I learned the word avenge/ə'vendʒ/ that meant revenge for, but I read it as /a'vendʒ/. Meanwhile, I thought of another word arise /ə'reɪz/ which meant produced, appeared, so I adopted associative memory method to learn other words like away/ə'weɪ /, asleep/ ə'sli:p /, America/ ə'merɪkə/. The letter A in all these words can be pronounced as /ə/. I thought this method could make me understand and memorize unfamiliar words easier and faster. Besides, memorizing their pronunciations incidentally was helpful for spelling words.” (LD-4-7-March-23)

Furthermore, she sometimes invested her energy in English grammar exercises. Lan said in the interview that before college, her teacher did not systematically explain grammar knowledge, which resulted in many mistakes in her sentence expressions. To better deal with the grammatical knowledge test in the TEM-4, she had to make up grammar knowledge in her spare time.

“I wanted to pass the TEM-4 in June. Thus, I did exercises about tense and voice in the twelfth section of "1000 Questions of TEM-4 Grammar and Vocabulary". I first outlined the key knowledge related to tense and voice and then finished the relevant exercises. As for the knowledge that I have doubts, I would ask the internet for help.” (LD-2-6-April-18)

6.0 DISCUSSION

6.1 Middle and High-Level Proficiency Participants Held Positive English Pronunciation Learning Beliefs, While Low-Level Proficiency Participants Had Opposing Ideas

In this study, Chen (a high-level proficiency case) and Ping (a mid-level proficiency case) believed that English pronunciation was crucial. Both believe that it can help individuals actualize their envisioned identities in addition to providing some cultural capital in the form of enhanced speaking and listening abilities. These findings seem to concur with other studies on English as a Foreign language (EFL) (Phuong, 2019; Simon, 2005; Alghazo, 2015; Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015; Nowacka, 2012; Nguyen & Hung, 2021) On the other hand. Lan, the low-level proficiency case thought that English pronunciation was unimportant. Her assessment, supported by other Chinese research (Xu, 2015), was that it was a minor Cinderella. Thus, this study reveals that participants with varying levels of English pronunciation skills had quite different opinions about learning the language and formed different investment behaviors.

6.2 Influence of Social/ Cultural Capital in Learners' Strategic Investment in English Pronunciation

According to Norton (2015), language learners have the desire to achieve a positive return on their investment—a rise in the value of their cultural and social capital—by investing in a target language to acquire a greater variety of symbolic and material resources. This is illustrated in Chen's case. In wanting to improve her skills in English speaking and listening, she eagerly corrected her classmate's phonetic errors in the classroom, actively read the sentence's weak and strong forms, and sought the teacher's assistance. In addition, she continued to practice her English phonetic skills outside of the classroom using various techniques and strategies. Similarly, Ping is serious about wanting to improve her listening and speaking skills which would benefit her when she becomes an English teacher in the future. Like Chen, Ping persisted in engaging in several different strategies including writing down suggestions made by her translation teacher in the Tourism Translation class. Outside of the classroom, Ping continued to do dictation exercises and repeat the news on Voice of America (VOA) to improve segmental proficiency. However, Ping decided to give up after realizing that her super-segmental phonetic knowledge would not increase significantly enough for a written exam, despite her best efforts. Lan, on the other hand, opted to ignore English pronunciation as she realized that it could not help her achieve high scores in the examinations. She focused on her TEM-4 and TEM-8 examinations both in and outside of the classroom. These findings here seem to resonate with previous scholars' (Bourdieu, 1991; Babino & Stewart, 2019; Massó & De Costa, 2023) argument that learners' strategic choices to invest in different L2-mediated practices may be influenced by perceptions of whether particular investments will accumulate various forms of cultural and/or social capital, which in turn may influence identity (re)construction.

6.3 Influence of Imagined Identity on English Pronunciation Investment

Studies have shown that when English is not the primary language of communication, it is crucial to emphasize the significant role that imagined identity plays in students' continued investments in English pronunciation (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Sung, 2019; Wu, 2017; Wang & Jiang, 2024; Huang & Hashim, 2021; Kong & Kang, 2022). In both Chen's and Ping's cases, their pronunciation investment appeared to be restricted to a limited range of contexts, such as in the university classroom and dormitory. Both them two could only find English-speaking opportunities in a select and transient place. They perceived that there were insufficient social activities in the classroom and it was hard to make friends with more experienced English-speaking exchange students on campus. Consequently, both believed that continuing with the

investments in English pronunciation seems unprofitable in the short run. This implies that compared to other second language (L2) learners in English-speaking contexts where speaking opportunities are more abundant and their L2 investments usually yield faster returns (Norton, 2015; Sung, 2019), the L2 identities Chen and Ping established in a non-English-speaking society may be more fragile. It is interesting to note that, rather than being motivated by the local settings' immediate benefits, Chen and Ping's ongoing L2 investments in a setting where English is not the primary language appear to be primarily driven by the imagined identities they envisioned for the future. In Chen's case, it was her vision of being an English blogger and an English teacher through "the power of imagination" as proposed by Kanno and Norton (2003). Similarly, Ping's desire was to be an English teacher who has standard pronunciation. That is, Ping and Chen's efforts in pursuing the correct English pronunciation both inside and outside of the classroom seem to have been driven by the expectation of long-term benefits, particularly in terms of acquiring the kinds of cultural capital that would be necessary for admittance into the community they see for themselves in the future. Lan, on the other hand, did not believe that good English pronunciation was related to the type of career or the person she wanted to become in her imagined future so that she tended to be a passive learner without any intentional investment in English pronunciation learning.

6.4 Influence of Agency in English Pronunciation Learning investment

According to Martin, Sugarman and Thomson (2003), agency refers to one's capacity to exercise control over phenomenal and functional consciousness while a human, as an agent, needs to be conscious to deliberately select and execute actions to achieve desired outcomes. For Chen and Ping, although their investment in English pronunciation was largely influenced by cultural capital and imagined identities, the role of agency is also an important factor in shaping their different investments in diverse contexts. In this study, Chen who is a high-level student, actively used her agency to construct multiple positive identities. She took the role of an assistant teacher in the spoken English class, and an active learner in the listening and speaking English class. Outside of the classroom, she is a self-disciplined learner, acquiring segmental and suprasegmental features to achieve cultural capital and imagined identity. Additionally, she decided to forego the question-and-answer activity in the classroom since she found it to be uninteresting. Similarly, Ping avoided participating in the oral report presentation in the Tourism English class due to her classmates' accented English. She tended to be a listener rather than a speaker due to her reclusive attitude and weak pronunciation of English. However, in the relaxed environment of her dormitory room, she was

an enthusiastic learner who read after the audio to pick up segmental details.

Both Chen and Ping's intentional and chosen investments in different L2 behaviors could be seen as evidence of personal agency. However, as an agency was by no means "socially unfettered free will," it was also crucial to acknowledge the contextual constraints on participants' use of agency in learning how to pronounce words in English (Ahern, 2001). In other words, social institutions can both constitute and shape agency (Block, 2007). For instance, the abusive authority and the lack of institutional support for cross-cultural learning between domestic and international students restricted Chen's access to the networks of exchange students and L2 interactional opportunities on campus. In the same vein, the difficulty of English suprasegmental features and written-examination culture prevented Ping from moving towards fuller investment. Therefore, it can be concluded that while cultural capital and imagined identity encourage participants to use their agency to direct L2 investments, a range of contextual constraints may have an impact on how the agency is used in L2 development and investments, which may subsequently have an impact on the outcomes of the individual L2 learning trajectory (Sung, 2018).

7.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The multiple case studies have shown that those with high and middle proficiency in English pronunciation thought that pronouncing words correctly would help them both to realize their imagined identities and to get better at speaking and listening in the language. On the other hand, the one with poor English pronunciation proficiency has a pessimistic outlook on learning English pronunciation. Their radically divergent approaches to acquiring English pronunciation were influenced by those two opposing points of view. In other words, their perceived identity and cultural capital support their investment in English speech. It is important to remember that their purposeful and deliberate L2 investments are also influenced by their personal agency in reaction to specific contextual circumstances.

Therefore, to fully comprehend the intricacies of learners' varied investments in English pronunciation, the article emphasizes the significance of having a comprehensive interpretation of individuals' English pronunciation learning both within and outside of the classroom. The findings of the study could have potential pedagogical implications. Firstly, the school should organize more intercultural communication activities for students to practice English pronunciation. Secondly, schools can arrange social practice activities as early as

possible to extend students' imagined identities that motivate them to keep investing. Thirdly, teachers should try to create a supportive and kind learning environment in the classroom for introverted and poor students.

8.0 LIMITATION OF STUDY

This study has several limitations. First, the case study was conducted on a limited number of participants in one university. This potentially limits the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could include more students from universities within the city versus those outside the city, or between a normal university and a non-normal university to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' investment in English pronunciation. Second, data from this study came from the participants' self-reported experiences and perceptions. These subjective data, although valuable, could also have their own biases and limitations. More objective data collection method should be adopted such as questionnaire. Third, future studies could be a longitudinal study to observe the evolution of students' investment.

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