

**DREAMS AND CHALLENGES:
RURAL CHINESE POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH
LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL)**

By

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(Dissertation) submitted

to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Education

Memorial University of Newfoundland

September 2018

St. John's Newfoundland and Labrador

Abstract

English as a foreign language (EFL) in China is predominantly regarded as a tool for the country to achieve modernization and for individuals to pursue education and employment. Students from rural China, however, typically present little interest and poor school achievement in EFL learning. While rural students' challenges in EFL learning have long been a problem of economic and social inequality, only little research addresses how rural students understand their challenges in relation to current EFL education in China. The purpose of this study is to investigate how rural students connect their challenges in EFL learning with the structural system of EFL education in China through their perceptions of EFL learning and their narratives of the challenge. Drawing on a poststructural paradigm, this study assumes that the individual rural student's partial and situated knowledge will inform what is constructed as authoritative knowledge in and what is excluded from the context of EFL education in China. A life story research was performed with an attempt to foreground rural students' knowledge and question the dominant standards and practices in China's EFL education. Twelve postsecondary students originally from rural villages participated in life story interviews, providing not only factual details of their experiences and events regarding EFL learning, but also narrations of their experiences and events. A narrative approach was adopted to analyze both the participants' experiences and narratives in their life stories. The findings of this study

reveal that rural Chinese students often relate the challenge in EFL learning to the current structural system of EFL education in China. In such a context, the dominance of cosmopolitan culture in EFL textbook contents, the prevalence of oral communicative class activities, and the dominance of instrumentalist ideology in foreign language policy impose subtle exclusionary forces upon rural students in their EFL learning. The participants' understanding of what is constructed as dominant concepts and practices provides both theoretical and pedagogical implications for China's EFL education. More educational and pedagogical efforts are to be made to uncover and reduce the subtle exclusion of EFL education for improving equity in foreign language education.

Acknowledgment

I first would like to express my sincere thanks to Dr. Xuemei Li, my supervisor, for her valuable support and professional guidance throughout my years of the Ph.D. study. Her enthusiasm for doing research, passion for teaching students and love for life have provided me with a role model leading me to move forward to my completion of the thesis research. I would also thank Dr. Elizabeth Yeoman for her selfless contribution of expertise and insights to supporting my research project. Many of my inspirations in the research originated from our discussions and communications. My sincere thanks go to Dr. Gerard Van Herk who always provided constructive feedback, listened to my viewpoints with great interest and cheered me up with his style of humour. In addition to the supervisory committee members I mentioned above, my special gratitude goes to Dr. Sharon Penney and Dr. Antoinette Doyle who devoted their time to exchanging their thoughts and suggestions for my research. I owe many thanks to Donna, my old friend, for her help in proofreading some thesis chapters. I am also grateful to my fellow doctoral students for their company from which I received both academic and moral support. My heartfelt thanks also go to the twelve participants in my research. Without their trustful participation, my research would have been impossible.

The most important source of strength to complete this study comes from my family. Despite the distance of thousands of miles away from Canada, their hearts

have been staying with me. I am indebted to my mum, my dad, my sister and my nephew for their unconditional deep love for me that gets me through all the difficult moments. Last but not least, my sincere appreciation goes to Gang Liu, my husband and life companion, for his personal sacrifices in order to support my pursuit of a Ph.D. dream.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of this research project. After explaining why I am interested in studying the issue of rural Chinese students' English learning, I present the purpose of the research, the research questions and the significance of the research. Then I define the terms to be frequently used in this thesis and provide a synopsis of the chapters.

1.1 Why Study Rural Chinese Students?

This research project is an inquiry into rural Chinese students' challenge in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) learning. This study was triggered by my experience with one of my former students from a rural village. Before starting my Ph.D. study, I had taught many students from the countryside during my fifteen years of EFL teaching at a university in the West of China. Mostly these students were polite, quiet and humble in my English class. However, what happened on a summer afternoon shocked me and afterward compelled me to reflect on potential problems of EFL teaching in relation to this group of learners from rural areas.

It was an afternoon in early July when most of the fourth year undergraduates packed their luggage and departed the campus. I was leaving my office after work. Suddenly, a student-looking young adult stopped me at the door. "I have been waiting

for a long time.” He stared at me with anger. I was confused. I did not know who he was. “Let’s go and see the Dean! Let’s go.” He shouted and tried to grab me by the arm. I was startled and moved my arm away. “If you don’t go with me, I will come every day!” He kept shouting madly. Fortunately, his class advisor came to the spot before the student got more violent and took him away. I felt even more scared when I knew afterward that the student came with a specific purpose.

His class advisor told me the whole story. The young man turned out to be my former student from two years earlier. He came to threaten me to change his “fail” into “pass” for one of his English exams. At the time he was graduating from the university, he was offered a post of a mathematics teacher in a middle school in a town. However, that school required a “no-fail” academic transcript before sending out the official job offer. The score of the English exam was his only fail throughout his four years of university education.

Fortunately, I didn’t encounter that angry student again on campus and his score was not changed. While all my colleagues criticized how terrible the student was to force a teacher to change his score, I had mixed feelings about him. I was scared of his raging eyes, threatening words and violent emotions. I was sorry for his grade in the course that I had taught. I had sympathy for this student who was desperate for a job before his graduation from the university. I also had concerns for his future life if he lost the job offer. Most importantly, as his teacher, the feeling of guilt occupied me—if only I had provided more support for his study to obtain a pass! It came to my

awareness that this student almost could be seen as a victim of the EFL program—failing the exam, threatening the teacher, facing potential punishment and loss of the job offer.

Though this student's extreme behaviour is an exception, his problem with EFL learning is not uncommon among rural students. English is a required course for every student from primary school to university in China. In order to complete their education and get employed after graduation, rural students need to learn English. It is a common phenomenon in my university that the students from the countryside regard English learning as a very challenging task. These students were often mentioned by teachers as those who lack interest in the EFL course and have a poor English knowledge base. Some teachers complained that rural students' low scores in the English tests would influence the assessment of their teaching performance at the end of the academic year.

Learning a foreign language in one's home country is not easy, and it can be even more difficult for students who come from socially and economically disadvantaged areas. Rural students' problems in EFL learning can lead to their frustration in further education and loss of employment opportunities, which may intensify the educational and social inequality in today's China. As an EFL teacher and researcher, I have desired to explore rural students' challenge in EFL learning seeking educational and pedagogical ways to facilitate their learning. I am also curious about what aspects of the current EFL policies and practices in China are

connected with rural students' challenge in EFL learning. I hope that EFL education in China will be improved for the benefit of the students from disadvantaged socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds.

1.2 Purpose Statement

1.2.1 Background

English is a *foreign* language in China. It is neither necessary for daily communication nor used as the language of school instruction. Interestingly there are 390.16 million EFL learners, accounting for the overwhelming majority of foreign language learners in China (Wei & Su, 2012). People learn English for the purpose of travel, studying or working abroad, or getting employed in foreign ventures. For Chinese students, this foreign language is a 12-year language program mandatory from elementary school to high school and to university. However, it is very hard for Chinese students to become proficient English users in the Chinese context. As a school subject equally important to Chinese and Mathematics in entrance examinations to a higher level of education, EFL study presents enormous pressure for every student.

It is a common challenge for students from rural communities to become successful EFL learners at school. Their low school achievement in this subject can eventually lead to their unequal access to opportunities for further education and future employment when they graduate (Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Gao, 2012). Rural

students are inevitably disadvantaged in receiving education during the violent process of urbanization taking place in rural China, when many village schools are merged and moved away and teachers relocate to urban schools (Liu, 2011; Xu, 2015; Zhou, 2012). I will further discuss in detail the ongoing urbanization in rural China and how it impacts rural schools and their students in Chapter Two.

1.2.2 Knowledge Gap

Rural students' challenge in EFL learning is acknowledged as a serious issue in the field of school teaching. These students are usually characterized as EFL learners who present poor performance in English language skills, lack a strong knowledge base and have emotional barriers of fear and anxiety (Li, 2010; Wang & Ding, 2001). In the recent decade, there is a slight increase in the research interest in learners' socio-cultural backgrounds that pose negative influences on language learning. Lack of interest and motivation, lack of confidence, uncertain learning goals, parents' low level of education, and the limited number of qualified teachers are found to be common problems among rural students' learning (Liu, 2017; Long, 2016; Yuan, 2013). Other studies focus on the sociological aspects of the problem of rural EFL students, arguing that insufficient social, economic, and cultural capital lead to their poor achievement in English (Hamid, 2009; Li, 2010). In these studies, rural students' challenges in EFL learning are associated with their deficiencies of economic, social and cultural resources. However, little is known about how rural students understand

their challenges in EFL learning and how they connect their challenges with current EFL education in China.

1.2.3 Purpose Statement

In order to achieve a more nuanced understanding of how rural Chinese students understand the connection between the challenge in EFL learning and the system of EFL education in China, a conceptual framework of poststructuralism (Lather, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) is adopted in the thesis study. The study is designed in life story research (Miller, 2011) addressing what challenges rural students have experienced in EFL learning and how they narrate these challenges in connection with the context of EFL education. Life story interview (Atkinson, 1998) is applied to collect factual details of rural students' experiences and events regarding EFL learning, and their narrations of experiences and events. The participants are twelve students who are originally from rural villages and currently studying in universities in a city in Southwest China. The participants' accounts of EFL learning experiences in the interviews are treated with a narrative analysis (Miller, 2011) focusing on what is discursively constructed by and within the participants' stories of EFL learning as the dominant structure of EFL education in China.

1.2.4 Significance of the Study

The findings of the study contribute to three domains of EFL research-- EFL learners from rural China, China's foreign language policy and EFL education, and research on underprivileged language learners of a dominant language in general. A nuanced understanding of these topics will provide theoretical and practical implications for moving language education in China towards a more equitable model.

First of all, this study contributes to a better understanding of the EFL learners from rural China who make up a large proportion of foreign language learners and face great challenges in EFL learning. As I discussed in Section 1.2.2 Knowledge Gap, in much of the existing research, the understanding of rural students' challenges in EFL learning is limited to their deficiency in social and economic resources. In this study, I explore what other challenges they are confronted with in addition to their social and economic disadvantages, especially those that are related to covert forms of historical and social forces inherent in EFL education. This understanding of rural students is expected to provide implications for making EFL teaching in China a little better by raising awareness of and minimizing the historical, social and cultural hegemony to which these students are subject.

Secondly, this study is dedicated to a better understanding of the complexity of foreign language policy and EFL education in the context of contemporary China. EFL education is generally regarded as a success within China in terms of its role in

national economic development and its benefit for individual learners in their pursuit of education and employment. The inclusion of rural students in the EFL program is naturally viewed as social and educational progress. In such a context, the social and cultural hegemony of the language policy and education have been ignored. There are certain aspects of foreign language education that may sustain existing power relationships or create new ones (Tollefson, 1991). This study presents a vantage point on current foreign language education in China through the lens of rural students' learning experiences, seeking the aspects that have been taken for granted but posed challenges to rural students in their EFL learning. I believe that awareness of the nature of China's foreign language policy and education will contribute to more educational equality.

Thirdly, this study adds to the research on underprivileged language learners in different EFL and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) contexts by providing insight into rural Chinese students' challenges in EFL learning. It is a common theme in language education for many nations and regions how to teach another language to socially and economically underprivileged students for their educational and employment benefit, and, at the same time, avoid imposing hegemony on the students' ideologies, values and identities. This study based in the EFL context of China will enrich the understanding of this common theme and provide specific lessons and experiences of language teaching and policy-making for the EFL and ESL contexts elsewhere.

1.3 Frequently Used Terms

The following terms are frequently used in this thesis. As they can be defined in different disciplines and from different perspectives, these terms are clarified and illustrated as specifically used in this research. Definitions of theoretical concepts such as “imagined community” and “investment” are discussed in “Chapter Two Literature Review”.

EFL: EFL is an abbreviation for “English as a Foreign Language”. The Cambridge Dictionary (2018), refers to the teaching of English to people whose first language is not English. More importantly, EFL students are learning English while living in their own countries and outside an English speaking culture. EFL students usually have only a few opportunities to use English outside of the classroom and very limited exposure to English speakers and English-speaking cultures (Oxford University Press ELT, 2011). In China, where Mandarin Chinese is the dominant language, English is only taught and learned as a foreign language in the classroom and not used in daily life. Though the development of technology allows many Chinese students more exposure to English speakers and cultures, EFL learning remains difficult without sufficient opportunities to practise using it. More information and discussion on EFL teaching and learning in the context of China will be found in Chapter Two.

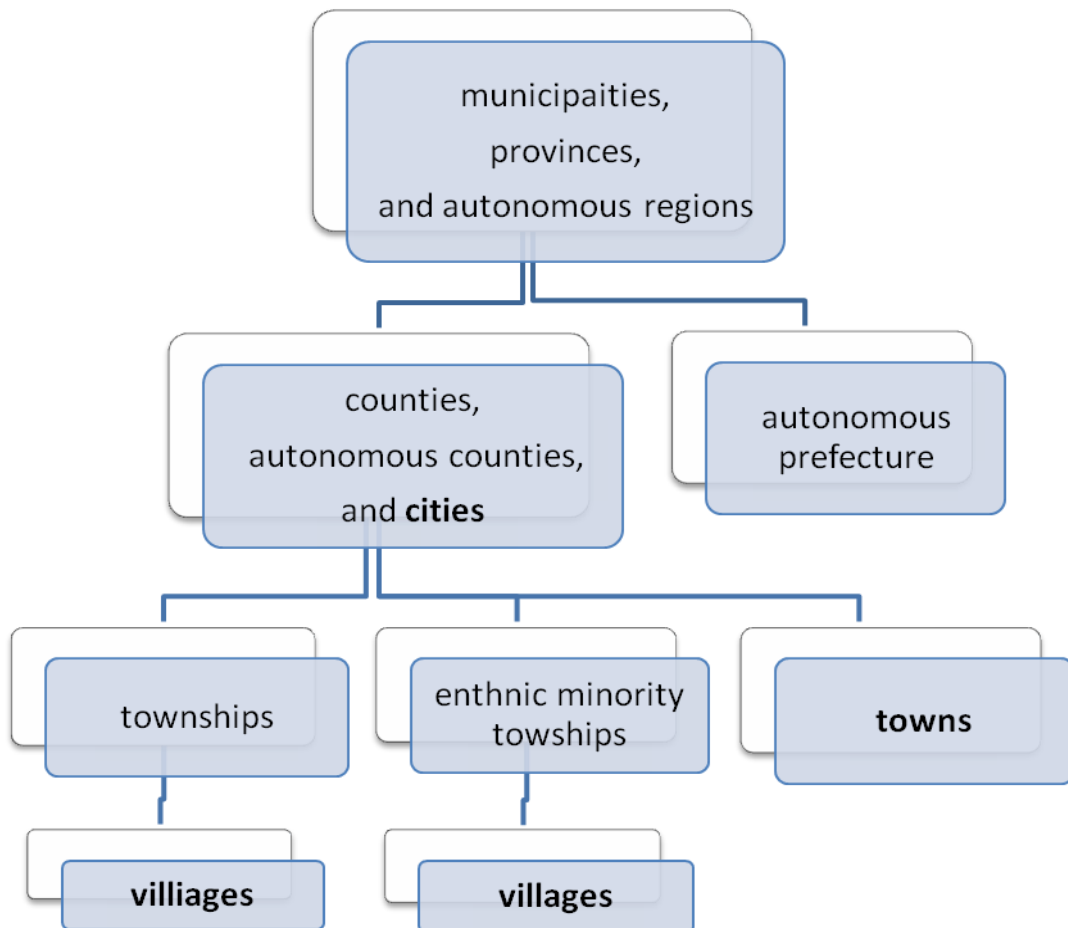
ESL and ELT: ESL is short for “English as a Second Language”. It is a term

used to refer to the study of the English language by non-native speakers. ESL teaching and learning usually take place in a country or region where English is an official or significant language. For example, an international student in Canada can be an ESL learner; in the Philippines and India, students learn ESL as an important language for communication. ELT is an abbreviation for “English Language Teaching”. It usually refers to teaching English to people whose first language is not English. Both EFL teaching and ESL teaching are included in ELT.

Cities, towns and villages: According to the definitions in Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries (2018), cities, towns and villages are different in size—“village” a very small town in the rural area, “city” a large and important town, and the size of “town” in between. In addition, “city”, “town” and “village” in this thesis refer to the units of the three-tier administrative division system of China (State Council of People’s Republic of China, 2014). In this system, the first tier includes provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly under the Central Government; on the second level, there are autonomous prefectures, counties, autonomous counties and cities; on the third tier are townships, ethnic minority townships, and towns. Therefore, “city” is a second-tier administrative unit while “town” is a basic unit at the third tier along with townships. “Village” is the bottom unit under townships. Additionally, among the cities in a province, the capital city is usually the provincial center of economy and culture. Similarly, among towns, the county town is where the county government is located with a larger population and a more developed economy than the rest of the

county. The following chart illustrates the administrative levels of cities, towns and villages in China's administrative division system.

Figure 1 Cities, towns and villages in the administrative division in China



The administrative division of China is a complex system in terms of its complicated rules based on a series of statistics concerning population, economy, infrastructure and public service. Furthermore, influenced by the large-scale rural-urban migrations since 1979, the heavily populated large cities and newly-built towns grow steadily (Ma, 2011).

Rural students: Before talking about rural students, I will focus on what “rural” means in this thesis first. According to Dictionary.com (2018), the word “rural” has three levels of meanings: the first is “of, relating to, or characteristic of the country, country life, or country people, rustic”; the second is “living in the country”; on the third level is “of or relating to agriculture”. Based on this definition, “rural students” refers to students who come from places geographically located outside of towns and cities and whose families are closely connected to agriculture. In the context of urbanizing China today, rural students are characterized by their pursuit of education in different locations, usually from the village to the town and to the city. Because the nearest middle and high schools are in towns, rural students need to leave their home village to pursue more education. For postsecondary education, they travel further away from their home to cities. Unlike students in the cities who live with their parents throughout primary and middle schools and even university, students from rural areas often start their on-campus residence when they attend middle school. Relevant details are presented in “Urbanization and Education in Rural China” in Chapter 2. In Table 3 in Chapter 3, there are specific details on how school locations change when rural student participants pursue further education.

1.4 Overview of Chapters

This dissertation is composed of six chapters. The first chapter gives a brief introduction to the research project, outlining the research background, the research

problem, the purpose of research, research questions and the significance of the research.

In Chapter 2, the relevant literature revolving around the issue of rural EFL learners is demonstrated and discussed, with an emphasis on Chinese students and the context of China's EFL education. In addition to the two theoretical constructs "imagined community" and "investment", this chapter unfolds the complexity of the dimensions of EFL education, discussing issues concerning linguistic imperialism, language commodification and language learner identities from a socio-cultural perspective. Studies on the beliefs, pedagogies and learner identities in EFL are also reviewed against the background of the globalization and urbanization of China.

The third chapter illustrates why and how life story research is used to achieve the aims of the research. It also explains the process of data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4 reports the findings of the study on rural students' experiences with EFL learning. After introducing each participant's learning story as a whole, I present a series of key themes from students' experiences with EFL learning.

In the fifth chapter, findings of the research are discussed with regard to two major concepts: imagined community and investment. I focus on analyzing what kind of investors rural students are and in which imagined community they invest. Then the results are further discussed in relation to language policy and EFL teaching practice in China.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis with a summary of the research, implications and limitations of this study.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

This chapter lays out a broad theoretical background regarding rural Chinese students' understanding of the connection between the challenge in EFL learning and the structural system of EFL education in China. I first summarize the major theories and studies on the global use of English and how EFL is predominantly conceptualized in the intracultural context of China. Then I provide a description of poststructural theory of language learner identity and summarize the studies framed in this theory with an emphasis on those about Chinese EFL learners. After giving a critical evaluation of the existing studies on the context of EFL education and EFL learner identity in China, I suggest the research gap and list research questions at the end of this chapter.

2.1 English as a Global Language and English Language Teaching (ELT)

2.1.1 Global Use of English

English is currently spoken and learned internationally. English speakers are widely distributed around the world. This language is most commonly spoken in such countries as Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States. English is also most widely learned as the second or one of the official languages in about sixty countries and regions. Furthermore, it is a foreign language learned and taught in a lot

of countries, such as China and Japan. It has become a common language for people from different nations, ethnicities and cultures to communicate on international occasions. The global use of English in the contemporary world can be traced back to the history of British colonization in the 17th, the 18th and the 19th centuries. During those ages, millions of British people settled in the colonies around the world, such as in America, Africa and Asia, contributing to the status quo of English as the global language today. In the recent century, this status of English as the global language has been sustained by the significant role of the U.S. and the U.K. in the world economy and culture

The worldwide spread of English has aroused several economic, cultural and political concerns in ELT in the recent decades (e.g., Phillipson, 1992; Canagarajah, 1999; Heller, 2003). The global use of English is closely associated with the economic and political power of the mother-tongue speakers and nations. Is the teaching and learning of English transferring the cultural and ideological power over other nations along with its spread over the world? Do people in those nations benefit from learning English, or are they subject to the hegemony of the teaching and learning of the language and culture? Answering these questions will provide implications for ELT approaches and practices in English learning communities.

2.1.2 Linguistic Imperialism

While the global use of English facilitates the international communications,

it raises Phillipson's (1992) concerns about the relations of the dominance of English to the political and economic inequalities. He pointed out that ELT activities that were usually regarded as neutral and non-political actually transferred the economic and cultural power to the speakers of other languages. He called this phenomenon linguistic imperialism.

Linguistic imperialism is that the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by establishment and continuous reconstruction of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. (p.47)

On the basis of the above quote, linguistic imperialism is the unequal power relationships between languages and ideologies, and creates and reproduces unequal division of power and resource between the groups that are categorized by their spoken languages.

Furthermore, Phillipson (1992) indicated that the power of the English language and ideology was not imposed violently but transferred by way of the educational language planning as "the natural state of affair" (p.72).

English linguistic hegemony can be understood as referring to the explicit and implicit values, beliefs, purposes and activities that characterize the ELT profession and which contribute to the maintenance of English as a dominant language. (p.73)

The English linguistic hegemony is transferred covertly to English learners either through the language and culture or through the ELT pedagogy. In the core

English-speaking countries, the training for ELT professions is often viewed as “aid” to the research and education in periphery countries. As a result, the dominant role of English is legitimated in such fields as technology, international business, research and education and the inequalities are maintained.

Phillipson (1992) also questioned the dominant principles of ELT profession training. For example, native speakers are ideal English teachers, English should be only taught by means of English, or more learning produces better results. He concluded that ELT was hegemonic by nature --“the ELT policymakers themselves, in Centre and Periphery, in Ministries of Education, universities, curriculum development centres and the like are part of a hegemonic structure” (p.305).

2.1.3 Commodification of English

According to Heller (2003, 2010), the commodification of language is not a product, but a process of legitimizing the material and social value of the language in the national and international market. The commodification of English, in accordance, is the process in which the value of English is discursively legitimized with the development of the new economy in the international market. However, Heller’s theory emphasized that the value of English was not predetermined and fixed, but subject to ongoing changes. The English language and culture “must face new audiences, new publics, new Others when mobilized as resources for profit” (Heller, 2010, p.108).

During this process, new speakers, new meanings and new identities of the language are emerging. Viewing language as linguistic resources, Heller (2010) encouraged workers to “be flexible, to respond to the specific needs of niche markets, and to manage the movement of resources across linguistically diverse spaces” (p.107). The access to the language legitimized as material and symbolic resources can produce, control, distribute or constrain the allocation of other resources. If language learners possess diverse linguistic resources, they may claim the right to control their production. In Hellers’ view, language teaching supports the ownership of linguistic resources and the deployment of the resources, and therefore, can change the unequal control of resources and social inequality.

2.1.4 Complex Dimensions of ELT

The above illustration on linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) and commodification of language (Heller, 2003, 2010) shows two different perspectives on the spread of English and two different views of ELT respectively. Phillipson (1992) presented language under a political construct under which ELT was viewed as a way of maintaining and transferring linguistic hegemony. In contrast, Heller (2003, 2010) situated language in a political-economic context, arguing that building up speakers’ multilingual repertoire could be used as a strategy to solve social inequality. While the former theory focuses on the hegemonic forces of learning a dominant language over the learners, the latter emphasizes the benefits of possessing linguistic resources to

gain more economic and social rewards for the economically disadvantaged people.

Although it is important for language learners to attain more material and social resources through learning another language whose value is being legitimized in the global market, the cultural and ideological hegemony to which the learners are subject cannot be justified especially when the linguistic minorities learn a dominant language. Phillipson (2007) objected to the dominance of one international language and claimed that “all languages have value, and that use of one’s mother tongue is a human right” (p.197). He supported speakers of local languages to establish their linguistic human rights to use their own languages to counterbalance linguistic imperialism. Although we should combat the linguistic dominance and promote the use of local languages, the individual learners’ needs for owning linguistic resources and the aspirations to live a better life should be respected too. The key question is how to develop the ELT in a way that the hegemony of the dominant language over language learners can be minimized and their needs for diverse linguistic resources can be supported.

Canagarajah (1999) added the socio-cultural dimension to the issue of ELT by unfolding the complexity of ELT in an ethnic community in Sri Lanka. He explored the hegemony of English as manifested in the classroom life of a Sri Lankan Tamil community and demonstrates complex layers of ELT classroom— ideological conflicts, cultural tensions and individual identities. On the one hand, the students had high motivations to learn English based on their educational needs, job prospects,

social status, and the needs to understand other cultures and interact with a wider group of people. On the other hand, they showed subtle oppositions to the curriculum, textbook and pedagogy shaped within the Western discourse. His study found that the cultural content of the material, the use of English in classroom interaction and the collaborative task-oriented learning approach all conflicted with students' culture and generated their resistance.

Canagarajah (1999) summarized the resistance perspectives of ELT in the periphery communities as:

...the powerless in post-colonial communities may find ways to negotiate, alter, and oppose political structures, and reconstruct their languages, cultures and identities to their advantage. The intention is not to *reject* English, but to *reconstitute* it in more inclusive, ethical and democratic terms, so bring about the creative solutions to their linguistic conflicts...in the periphery. (p.2)

Canagarajah emphasized that the ELT classroom practices played an important role in assisting students in their appropriation and reconciliation of cultural and ideological conflicts. His critical pedagogy proposed that teachers should be responsible for detecting the cultural and ideological conflicts of the periphery students and facilitating their reconciliation of the conflicts. Similarly, Chang (2014) suggested a course of World English into EFL curriculum featuring discussion of issues regarding the spread of English as lingua franca, varieties of English, the divide between native and nonnative speakers, the ideology of Standard English and preservation of heritage

languages. This course raised students' critical awareness of power and politics concerning the spread of English.

Tollefson (1991) demonstrated how complicated the issue of ELT is for linguistic minority people in English-speaking countries. He was concerned about the taken-for-granted ideology that English was a tool for education and employment. He indicated that this instrumental view of English was based on an assumption-- "if linguistic minorities learn the dominant language, they will not suffer economic and social inequality" (p.10). This assumption sustained the existing power relationships and justified the language policies that excluded minority languages.

That is, language policy is one mechanism for locating language within the social structure so that language determines who has access to political power and economic resources. Language policy is one mechanism by which dominant groups establish hegemony in language use. (Tollefson, 1991, p.16)

Under the language policy that gives priority to certain linguistic groups, the educational system will exert hegemony on minority students. Although Tollefson's theory is mainly based on the analysis of the multilingual society, it provides general implications for the teaching and learning of a dominant language in diverse contexts.

On the basis of the above discussion, Phillipson (1992), Heller (2010), Canagarajah (1999) and Tollefson (1991) situate the language policy and the language education within different ideological frameworks. These frameworks unfold complex multi-layered dimensions of ELT, with which the language policymakers, researchers

and teachers can obtain an in-depth understanding of the nature of ELT across different contexts. In such a complex ELT context, the personal learning experiences are expected to be ambitious and challenging. For those who desire more material and social resources, learning another language creates “economic opportunities which attribute value to bilingual resources” (Heller, 2003, p.479), “the achievement of new identities and discourses none the less involves a painful process of conflicting ideologies and interests” (Canagarajah, 1999, p.2). The cultural and ideological conflicts are related to the hegemonic nature of ELT.

In order to minimize the hegemony imposed on English learners, many authors turn their attention to the role of the local context and culture in ELT. Phillipson (2001) called for anchoring English learning and teaching in the local cultural system. Canagarajah (1999) proposed a critical pedagogy for ELT focusing on reconciling students’ resistance and opposition. Tollefson and Tsui (2003) combined the students’ mother tongue and a second language for the medium of instruction in order to help students gain both the second-language skills necessary for higher education and employment and the effective subject-content education. Based on the above discussion, I argue that, for non-mother-tongue English learners from different regions of the world, the question should not be “to learn or not to learn”. It should be how the language policy planning, the educational authority, the curriculum development and the pedagogy can support and facilitate English learning by way of minimizing the hegemony and maximizing learners’ pride and confidence in their

mother tongue, their existing knowledge and their cultures and ideologies. In order to develop the ELT with less hegemony, it is crucial to focus the research attention on “the local” and its involvement in the language policy and the language education. In Pennycook’s (2010) view, “the local” is the particular local setting from which the local meaning is discursively created through the local practice of language. Canagarajah (2005) regarded the local language, local knowledge, local practice and local contexts as elements contributing to identities of students and teachers and the language policies and pedagogies. In the EFL context where students have fewer chances to use English outside the classroom, it is more important to integrate the local in EFL education. Involving the local is significant not only in diminishing the hegemony inherent in EFL education, but also in engaging students in learning the language and constructing of diverse identities of EFL learners.

2.2 English in the Intracultural Context of China

2.2.1 Background

English has become a global language shared by the different nations in the world. In contemporary China where Mandarin is the mother tongue and the official language, it is surprising to find a large population of EFL learners and the increasing popularity of EFL study across the country. According to a massive national survey of language use across mainland China by Wei and Su, (2012), English is currently the most popular foreign language with 390.16 million or 93.8% of foreign language

learners in China. However, because English is not an official language in China, only 3% of learners said they often used English in their daily lives.

Besides its overwhelming popularity over other foreign languages in China, English is one of the mandatory school subjects throughout the education system, from elementary school, to high school and to university. Its importance at school can be identified from its same score proportion to those of Chinese and Mathematics in the National Exams to Higher education (Gaokao) and the Provincial Admission Exams to High Schools (Zhongkao). For example, in the 2018 Gaokao, English takes up 150 of the total score 750, the same as that of Chinese or Mathematics.

The growing popularity of English has been associated with the development of the new economy of international trade and tourism since 1979 when the national policy of Reform and Open Door Policy was in effect (Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Gao, 2012). The high demand for English learning also stimulates an emerging business of private English training with an estimated market value of \$44 billion in 2010 (He, 2010).

It should be noticed that the status of English as a foreign language in China is significantly different from that in such countries as the Philippines and India where English is the second or official language, and the language of instruction at schools. Although China has the largest EFL learner group in the world, English is not an essential language for Chinese people to communicate in daily lives, nor a language of instruction at school. Only 7.3% of the EFL learners use English often and 70% hardly

use it in daily lives (Wei & Su, 2012). Since it is not the primary vehicle for daily interaction or survival, the motivations to learn can be varied (Oxford, 2003).

2.2.2 China's Foreign Language Education Policy and Language Planning

The collective pursuit of learning English and the rapid growth of EFL learners have aroused extensive concerns about such issues as the language policy, the national culture, and the language ideology and identity. I first discuss the framework under which English is shaped as a foreign language in China's language planning.

While the growing popularity of EFL learning astonishes the world, few people know that the history of EFL teaching in school in the New China only lasts for about 40 years. According to Zhang's (2015) study of the evolution of China's foreign language education policy, Russian used to be the primary foreign language in 1950's, and foreign language education was completely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (a sociopolitical movement in China from 1966 to 1976 that paralyzed China politically and economically). With the restoration of China's lawful rights in the United Nations in 1971 and the implementation of Reform and Open Door Policy in the late 1970's, foreign language teaching and teacher training started to revive. Over the 1980's English became increasingly important for the international communication and economic development. Since the 1990's, English has been a required course through elementary, secondary and postsecondary education. English teaching and learning then started to develop in the "internationalized, normalized and

ecologicalized” way (Zhang, 2015, p.59).

Reviewing China’s history in the recent six decades, Gil and Adamson (2011) suggested that the current high status of English was uncertain on account of the ebb and flow of English in China in relation to political movements since the founding of New China in 1949.

As the economic modernization of Mainland China continues, whether the road is smooth or rocky, the tension between the appropriation of English and the language’s capacity to bring about social and cultural transformation will be played out on an increasingly larger scale. (Gil & Adamson, 2011, p.41)

This view implies that the current foreign language policy that priorities English over other foreign languages was made to uphold China’s rise to be an economic and political world power, and is subject to change due to the possibility of political movements. On the national basis, the government promotes English learning in way of using it to restore national self-esteem and prestige while withstanding its forces of linguistic and cultural imperialism (Gil & Adamson, 2011). Liu (2004) showed a similar view that China’s desire for integration into the global economic system was accompanied with a strong persistence in her own political ideology.

Linguistic and cultural imperialism of English, as a matter of fact, has never been out of concern since the 1990’s when English was established as a mandatory school subject in the education system. In Shen’s (2017) critical review of China’s foreign language education policy since 1949, the evolution of ideological framework

consisted of three stages: highly politicized stage (1949-1976), de-politicized or marketized stage (1978-2002) and transformative stage (2003 until now). EFL teaching and learning were revived at the second stage with a strong inclination to instrumentalism to serve the market economy development. The functionality and instrumentality of English were greatly emphasized, and its relations to literature and culture were disconnected.

This tendency of de-politicized and marketized EFL as an instrument for the market economy has been criticized by some Chinese scholars. Shen (2017) listed a series of negative consequences of this linguistic instrumentalism, such as the abuse of the exchange value of English tests, the exaggerated symbolic value of English by the training market, and the isolation of language from humanity. Zhang (2015) criticized the unbalanced ecology of China's foreign language education. English has been greatly prioritized over other foreign languages in terms of its program length and importance in the admission examinations to a higher level of education. Zhang also pointed out this over-emphasis on EFL in education leads to students' deficiency of Chinese culture and barricades their development of national identity.

In addition to the criticism of the EFL education in China, some researchers proposed a transformation of the prioritized status of English and the ideology of foreign language teaching. First of all, educational programs of diverse foreign languages should be developed to enhance the national linguistic power in domains of national defense, diplomacy, trade, justice and culture (Peng, 2015; Shen, 2017; Zhang,

2015). Secondly, the foreign language education should enhance learners' ability to comprehend and research foreign cultures by involving elements regarding humanity and culture (Peng, 2015; Shen, 2017). The third key point is to explore ways to integrate the national culture and spirit into foreign language education to meet the challenge of Western cultural hegemony (Peng, 2015; Zhang, 2015).

2.2.3 Commodification of English in China

China has become the largest EFL training market in the world, exemplifying the commodification of English along with the development of globalized new economy (Heller, 2003). Though not essential for daily communication and survival, English is legitimated as economic capital with regard to its high exchange value in the new economy of international trade, tourism and English training (Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Gao, 2012). Furthermore, due to its current weight in China's education and testing system, English also becomes a cultural capital that its holders are guaranteed for academic qualification and convertibility of the capital to money (Bourdieu, 1972). In this sense, those who are identified as "unsuccessful English learners" have fewer opportunities to progress toward the higher level of education and then to secure future employment. Gao (2012) argues that English, to some extent, becomes symbolic capital that implies social prestige and benefit. Because of the unequal distribution of social benefits based on English competence, English even becomes a social stratified that identifies the middle-class who owns this linguistic

resource from those who don't.

Gao's (2012) study also provides the evidence for the commodification of English in the context of contemporary China by demonstrating the English learning fever in Yangshuo, a famous tourist destination in China. In Yangshuo, the commodification of English is typical of its booming market of traveling for learning English and the association of English to the social status of the middle class. These Yangshuo-based findings may not be applicable to the general and other particular situations in China. However, they demonstrate that the development of the new economy in China contributes to the commodification of English that promotes the emerging of new markets, new speakers and new meanings of English. Furthermore, during this process, English learning, which was originally an instrument for restoring national self-esteem and prestige since late 1970's (Gil & Adamson, 2011), is gradually transformed to an active personal pursuit in order to access better education, more economic benefits, and higher social status.

We also need to notice that in China the commodification of English often influences the distributions of economic and social resources in a way different from the situation in Yangshuo as described in Gao's (2012) study. Zhang (2011) indicated that English had little practical value in the daily life. The EFL learners were often required to show the proof of their EFL proficiency and qualification mainly through scores and certificates rather than demonstrating their practical use of the language, in order to access more opportunities for education and jobs.

2.2.4 Hegemonic or Emancipatory EFL

According to Phillipson (1992), the linguistic and cultural hegemony is inherent in the dominant language and cannot be removed. The hegemonic power will be transferred and maintained by teacher training and language teaching. In China where the process of commodification of English is ongoing and maintained by the huge market of English teaching and training, the force of hegemony cannot be overlooked. Gao (2012) points out, this hegemonic power is submerged into a more covert form because English is actively pursued as a middle-class symbolic resource.

However, Qu (2011) challenges the theory and practice that fossilize and simplify the role of the foreign language to cultural hegemony or subjugation. He opposes to framing the complex power relations in the intracultural context in the homogeneous discourse of cultural colonization. The linguistic and cultural power relations within a culture are more complicated than those in the cross-cultural context, and therefore the role of foreign language is open for exploration within the particular culture.

According to Qu (2011), the intracultural context of China is characteristic of the following aspects. Firstly, it is necessary to identify China as a multilingual and non-colonized context. Unlike such former colonies as India where English was originally part of cultural colonization and its impact still maintains today, the EFL in China is taught for the purpose of global communication. The specific historical

knowledge of particular countries needs to be involved in understanding EFL in China instead of viewing it through the single lens of colonialism.

Secondly, the EFL in China should be situated in the intracultural context of China that is a complex hierarchical system of power relations itself. Qu (2011) analyzes the complexity of this linguistic and cultural system by demonstrating the dominance of Mandarin over more than 100 dialects, and the supremacy of Confucianism over diverse regional and ethnic cultures in the Chinese history. This monolithic intracultural system, though playing a significant role in forming a strong cultural and national identity, causes anxiety for cultural diversity and difference. Against such a historical backdrop, the introduction of English as an international language to China in the late 1970's, combined with the legitimated value of English as social and symbolic capital in the linguistic market of China, has been perceived more cooperative than confrontational.

Furthermore, Qu (2011) identified his view from the one that regards English class as the place of cultural confrontations:

It can be a place where English is viewed as the significant other which offers different perceptions that can liberate us from the constraints of our own culture, a place where people choose a perception not on the basis of simplistic identity politics that stresses differences only, a place where people, sharing the benefits of differences, can develop the translingual ability to 'translate, transpose and critically reflect on social, cultural and historical meanings'. (p.303)

Qu (2011) argues for the emancipatory and critical role of English in the intra-cultural context of China. English, when contacting with Chinese, interrupts the long-developed pattern of cognitive process, and create nuanced space and perspectives for EFL learners to cultivate their critical thinking through trans-lingual ability. Students who master more than one language have more than one way to view the reality and to construct discourses. Qu clarified his standpoint on learning another language as:

The translingual ability which interrupts and de-automatizes habituated cognition makes it possible for us to free ourselves from one mode of perception, or the influence of one power, given the fact that we have to be subject to powers. (Qu, 2011, p.305)

Qu's argument does not deny the impacts of the cultural hegemony of English as a global language over other disadvantaged languages. What he proposes is that when we understand the impacts of English, more research attention should be paid to the complex power relations of the linguistic and cultural system within a certain culture rather than simplifying them to the hegemony of one language on another. Qu's study also reveals that in contemporary China, there is the refusal to be driven by simplistic identity politics, and the desire to transcend it, and to "shuttle" between languages and cultures.

Similar to Gao's (2012) findings of active pursuits of English for personal benefits, Qu's (2011) claims focus on the role of EFL in transcending singular cultural

identity in the intracultural context of China. Both authors shift their attention to complex social and cultural conditions of China, and the new meanings of English created by active learning individuals, while refusing to simplify the impacts of English into cultural colonization. This view of learning a foreign language as a way of empowerment resembles Kaplan's (1993) reflections on her experiences with learning French as a foreign language. "Moments like this one make me think that speaking a foreign language is for me and my students, a chance for growth, for freedom, a liberation from the ugliness of our received ideas and mentalities" (p.211).

2.2.5 EFL Program in China's Education System

English is prioritized in the study of foreign languages due to the huge number of EFL learners (Wei & Su, 2012) and the significant role of EFL education in the education system in China.

At the level of elementary education, English is a mandatory course from Grade Three with an average of two to four classes every week. In the junior high school, the EFL class time usually increases to five hours or more. For senior high school students, the subject of English becomes as important as Chinese and Mathematics in terms of their class hours and score proportions in the National Admission Exam to the University (Gaokao). It is a common practice that in order to survive the competitive selection of first-tier universities (elite universities), many senior high school students invest more time and efforts in English than in other

subjects. However, the provision of EFL courses varies greatly across different schools in different regions of China. In many economically developed cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, the EFL course often starts from Grade One, while in some elementary schools in the economically underdeveloped areas the course is not even offered to students.

The newly admitted university students are survivors of many English tests and the Gaokao. These students all have an English learning history ranging from 6 to 12 years. However, English is still a required course for most non-English major students for the first two years of university. In higher education, the status of English is further strengthened. College English is among the few compulsory courses for students across disciplines, accounting for equal credits and class hours to those of major courses. This is also the only course at the level of higher education that is subject to the unitary national standard and the national testing system-- College English Test (CET) since 1987. In June and December every year, close to 10 million college students take CET-4 (for undergraduate degrees) or CET-6 (for graduate degrees). Results of CET are widely accepted as a barometer of one's English proficiency and usually become part of the criteria of personnel recruitment within China. Many college students spend more time studying English in preparation for prospective admission exams of graduate schools for their pursuit of a Master's or a Ph.D. degree.

It can be extremely challenging to learn a foreign language in an environment

where there are few chances to use it in daily life. A Chinese student has to invest enormous time and efforts in learning in order to pass the EFL tests and get access to a higher level of education and better opportunities for employment. However, this exam-oriented English teaching and learning in the education system has been widely criticized. The superiority of EFL course to others, the uniformed standard of assessment, oversized English classes, and low teaching efficiency have all been challenged. These critical feedbacks, in turn, have evoked series of reforms of college English teaching and test. Every few years, adaption and modification are made to the national syllabus, textbooks, or format and question types of EFL tests, particular Gaokao English and CET, by the national authority of education.

2.3 Language Learner Identity in Poststructural Theory

Based on the discussion in the previous section, there are two important aspects that can be informative and implicative of the EFL education in a certain local context. One is students' complicated and contradicted attitudes and perceptions, and another is the political, economic and social dimensions of the EFL education. The poststructural theory of language learner identity (Norton, 1997, 2010) combines these two aspects and extends to their relations that discursively developed during social practice. In this section, I will discuss this theory and its relevant studies. I first present the notion of identity from a poststructural perspective and discuss the main constructs of the language learner identity theory-- imagined community and

investment. I then demonstrate how this framework has been applied to the research learner identities in different contexts.

2.3.1 Language Learner Identities

Kaplan's (1994) autobiography *French Lessons*, which has intrigued a wide range of readers, unfolded a mosaic of her life stories about French learning and teaching.

Learning French did me some harm by giving me a place to hide. It's not as if there's straightforward American self lurking under a devious French one, waiting to come out and be authentic. That's nostalgia—or fiction, French is not just a metaphor, either—it's a skill. It buys my groceries and pays the mortgage. I'm grateful to French, beyond these material gains, for teaching me that there is more than one way to speak, for giving me a role, for being the home I've made from my own will and my own imagination. (p.216)

Through her memories of various events and scenarios, she collected her changing identities across time and space, such as a daughter of a Jewish lawyer, a girl with adventurous spirit, a passionate lover of French culture and a feminist scholar of French literature. There even co-existed a variety of selves in her imagination at one moment. For instance, when she heard “Madam” from her students, Kaplan (1994) felt she was not a French teacher, but “part mother, part policeman, part dictionary” (p.125).

The way in which Kaplan presents her understandings of and reflections on her multiple and shifting roles in relationship to learning French characterizes a more recent trend of research in the field of identity in second language learning. The scholars following this trend align themselves with poststructuralists who distinguish themselves from the psycho-linguistic researchers whose interest is either in characteristics of learning styles, cognitive strategies, beliefs and anxieties of language learners (e.g., Oxford, 2003), or in their group membership determined by social context or structural conditions.

Poststructural theorists in the field of language learning agree that the notion of identity refers to how language learners “understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (Norton, 1997, p.410). Identity is considered multiple, shifting and a site of struggle. Learners’ understandings of themselves shift across a range of situations, or are constructed and developed over time. Language is where our sense of ourselves and our subjectivity are constructed. As Norton and Toohey (2011) argue, in processes of language learning, learners are able to reframe their positions in relation to the world and people with which they interact, and “claim alternative identities from which to speak, listen, read and write” (p.415). Language learners desire to gain access to powerful positions by negotiating a sense of self by using the language across different places and at various points of time.

Norton’s (1997, 2010) theoretical construct of identities in language learning

has been widely applied by researchers of identities in second language learning in a wide range of non-English speaking contexts. Imagined community and investment are the two major concepts of her theory, offering ways for language educators to gain insights into how language learners make sense of themselves, the language they are learning, and the relationship between the two.

2.3.2 Imagined Community

The notion of imagined community is initially used by Anderson (1991) to explore the new meanings of nation, nationality and nationalism.

It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (religious). ... all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their false/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. (p.6)

Anderson's imagined community, distinguished from the concept of nation defined by territorial borders, presents a non-conventional conception of space in which people who possess the same cultural substance have the image of their union no matter where they are.

Norton (1997; 2010) used the term "imagined community" in the theory of language learner identity to refer to various communities that the language learners

desired to access when they learned a language. Both Anderson and Norton emphasize imagination as the human ability and the way in which people connect with each other. Imagined community refers to “groups of people— not immediately tangible and accessible—with whom we connect through the power of the imagination” (Norton, 2010, p.3). Whereas Anderson emphasized the political aspect of the community, Norton extended the conception to the wide range of power relationships in race, gender, ethnicity and culture in which language learners are situated (Norton, 1997). More importantly, Norton regards the construction of imagined community as a fluid and dynamic process through social practice, while Anderson focuses more on the language and the conception of temporality shared by the community members.

Framed in Norton’s notion of imagined community, Pavlenko and Norton (2007) suggested five typical identity clusters associated with English learners’ actual and desired memberships in imagined communities: postcolonial, global, ethnic, multilingual, and gendered identities. These multiple identities constructed through English learning show that the notion of imagination is a way for learners to appropriate meanings and create new identities, to go beyond the immediate and tangible environment, and to reach out to wider worlds. Norton and Kamal (2003) found that students of 12-13 years of age in a Pakistani school constructed various imagined communities in relation to their perception of literacy and English learning: a literate and educated community, a peaceful and religious nation, an international community with technological progress.

Understanding students' imagined communities and identities is significant in language teaching. Norton (2010) claims that in order to promote active participation in literacy practices, learners' sense of ownership of English and their imagined identities need to be enhanced through classroom teaching. She argued that the language teaching needs to encourage more active participation in learning by way of developing students' capacity for developing diverse imagined communities. Different forms of literary texts were suggested for students to explore their diverse identities, such as comics, drama and photography. In another study on the nature of English literacy events in HIV/AIDS education in Tanzania, Higgins (2014) argued that HIV/AIDS education in the forms of conventional literacy prevented local participants' contribution of their knowledge and experiences, hence creating a barrier to their constructing of new communities and identities. This finding indicated that the local knowledge and the opportunities for dialogues and reflections on the local experiences were significant in the literacy events for public health education.

2.3.3 Investment

Norton's (2010) conception of "investment" is an economic metaphor inspired by Bourdieu's (1977) conception of "capital" in his Theory of Practice. Refusing to view it in terms of the traditional capitalist theory, Bourdieu extended the conception of capital to the various forms of resources valued within a certain social field. Individuals and groups accumulate economic, social, cultural and symbolic

capital for the purpose of maximizing their economic and symbolic profits. Under this framework, language is viewed as cultural capital and can be converted interchangeably into another form of capital. Language learners invest in learning a language in the belief that “they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will, in turn, increase the value of their cultural capital” (Norton, 2010, p.3). Investment is used to refer to “a socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it” (Norton & Gao, 2008, p.110). After gaining more cultural capital, the language learner’s sense of self will be enhanced and more investment will be made.

Norton’s (2010) notion of investment is distinguished from the psychological concept of motivation in second language acquisition. Investment in language learning is a socio-cultural construct under which desires to learn a language are complex, mixed and ambivalent, and individual learners develop multiple and changing identities over time and space. Specifically, investment has two levels of meanings. One is learners’ social practices in diverse contexts where they learn and use the language, and the other the way they form or shift their identities in those contexts.

Investment, as a useful construct for studying mixed desires and commitment to language learning, has been widely used in the research of learners and their language use in diverse contexts (e.g., Chang, 2016; Lee, 2014). Skilton-Sylvester’s (2002) study demonstrated how investment in ESL learning were shifted and changed

in ESL classes in relation to student particular roles and identities. The findings of the study showed that Cambodian women's identities within their roles of spouses, mothers, sisters/daughters and workers respectively influence their participation in the adult ESL programs. In Hajar's (2017) study of impacts of English learning in homelands on students' adjustments of studying abroad, two postgraduate Syrian students invested their learning strategies, prior experiences and way of assessment in constructing their English learners identity in the U.K.. The findings of Kim's (2014) study suggested that language learners' investment in ESL identities affected their choices of language uses. When using English in a conversation, an ESL learner made a decision on what language pragmatic norms to use according to which identity he/she was going to invest. As used in the above studies, investment is a socio-cultural concept that allows researchers to scrutinize the particular context in relation to learner identities and their ways of learning.

2.3.4 EFL Teaching Challenges Based on Norton's Theory

Norton's theory of language learner identity has made many pedagogical implications for foreign language teaching. Teachers are required to consider which pedagogical practices are "appropriate and desirable" (Norton, 2010, p.1) to students and which will better support students development of capacity for imagining wider range identities across time and space. The concept of "student-centeredness" has to be reshaped in language classroom based on the understanding of students' desired

communities and their investment in learning. Norton's theory emphasizes the sense of ownership over meaning-making on the part of the student as the precondition for the enhanced identities. Since enhanced identities will lead to more active participation in learning practices, it is an important task of language teaching to develop students' power to make sense of their own world. Without the ownership over meaning-making, "learning becomes meaningless and ritualized" (Norton, 2010, p.10). In order to enhance the learner's ownership over meaning-making, she indicated that a wide range of texts such as comics, drama and photography provided opportunities for students to explore diverse identities with regard to their positions of relative power in a given literacy event.

Though it is true that teaching practice should enhance students' ownership of the language by developing their capacities for imagining diverse communities and identities, it can be a very challenging task for the EFL teaching in an EFL context. With little exposure to the English language in their homelands and few opportunities to use English outside of the classroom, EFL learners face great challenges in establishing their relationships with English than those who live in English-speaking regions. In the EFL context, it is not enough to celebrate students' agency in negotiating conflicts, overcoming challenges and actively constructing their imagined communities. In such a context, a common paradoxical phenomenon is that despite various desires to learn English, some students may opt to quit investing in learning at the cost of their education and employment at risk (e.g., Li, 2010). Therefore, in

addition to understanding how the human agency works in language learning, it is important for EFL teachers and researchers to study why and how the language learners' desires to learn end up with investment withdrawing.

Another challenge that EFL teachers and researchers face to develop students' ownership of English is the impacts of "the local" (Canagarajah, 2005; Pennycook, 2010) on students' investing in EFL learning. Situated in a particular local discourse, EFL students' community imagining and attitudes towards investing can be greatly shaped by, for example, the local knowledge, the local values and the local ideology. On the other hand, EFL students do not have as much exposure to the English language and culture and as many opportunities to practise using English as the learners in English-speaking regions do. Therefore, EFL researchers need to consider how students' capacity for imagining diverse identities can be discursively supported through teaching practices. In this process, students' identities, existing knowledge and personal experiences should not be degraded. Unfortunately, it remains an under-researched area how "the local" plays a role in EFL students' imagining of new communities and new identities.

A third concern about EFL teaching practice is the influence of the dominant ideology of English as economic capital (e.g., Heller, 2003) on learners' imagining of communities. While this dominant ideology exerts hegemony on linguistic minorities in English-speaking regions (Tollefson, 1991), it also influences EFL learners' identity and community imagining. Driven by this ideology, English learners often have high

expectation of material and symbolic returns from learning it, so much so that they may imagine the communities of English speakers in biased and distorted ways. As Norton and Kamal's (2003) study shows, young Pakistani students often overestimated rewards of learning English in education and material wealth. Li and Simpson (2013) also found that migrant workers built up their imagined identities of English language speakers as better-paid workers, successful professionals, and British residents. Similarly, they had a belief in the role of English proficiency in gaining local friendship, accessing employment and achieving professional success. However, their imagined community collapsed when they could not obtain those rewards after achieving a high English proficiency.

Based on the discussion above, the imagined community and investment are significant theoretical constructs to be used in the field of EFL language teaching and learning. However, it is not sufficient to find out what imagined communities in which the EFL students desire to participate and how they invest in learning the language. In an EFL context, more studies need to focus on the challenges with which the learners are confronted in constructing their identities in EFL learning. I argue that it is more important to uncover the subtle forces that influence students' construction of certain imagined communities or pose challenges to their participation in certain imagined communities.

The nuanced perspectives of language learner identity are based in "the local"—the local historical and social context, the regional values and cultures, and

the learners' experiences and aspirations. Norton and Toohey (2011) call for more research on identities and imagined communities of language learners in different social context.

...the imagined identities and imagined communities of learners are central in the struggle for legitimacy. As language learners in every region of the world claim the right to speak and be heard... (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p.437)

My research on Chinese EFL learners from rural areas is a response to this call and contributes to enriching the understanding of language learners based in the rural context of China and the rural students' experiences. Moreover, The nuanced understanding of language learner identity also lies in discovering the hegemony that influences EFL students constructing of their identities. We can not assume that students' desires to learn English come from nowhere, and their identity construction is completely active and independent. Considering the hegemonic nature of ELT, investigating students' challenges in constructing identity is of general significance in developing an EFL education with less hegemony. This current study contributes to uncovering the hidden forces of the EFL education in China and their relationships to the rural students' challenges in constructing their EFL learner identities. I elaborate the context of the EFL education in China in the next section.

2.4 Identities of Chinese EFL Learners

As mentioned in the previous section, Gui (2005) took the view that the

Chinese students lack intrinsic motivation for learning. The study by Gao, Zhao, Cheng and Zhou (2007) is among the early research that provides evidence that Chinese students are motivated to learn English. The study found that the students' identity was changed as a result of EFL learning in different ways. An ideal outcome of EFL learning was productive bilingualism in which two sets of languages, behavioral patterns and values were mutually reinforced. Results showed that the more EFL learners were intrinsically interested in learning, the more likely they were to experience additive and productive changes. In the recent decade, the research on identities of the Chinese EFL learners has been rising dramatically along with the fast-paced social transformation and the increasing EFL population. I give a brief review of these studies in the following section.

2.4.1 Shifting Constructions of EFL Learner Identities since the 1980's

As discussed in the section of "Background" in this chapter, the prioritized status of EFL in education was initiated in the late 1970's with the implementation of Reform and Door-Opening Policy and its privilege established over the past 40 years with economic rise of China. The construction of EFL learner identities in China experiences an evolution in response to the shifting historical and social conditions.

Gao's (2014) study unfolded a historical picture of changing constructions of Chinese EFL learner identities through his analysis of three individual language learning celebrities who presented as role models in their generations respectively.

The first was Zhang Haidi, the role model for English learners in the 1980's. Zhang portrayed herself in her autobiography as a strong-willed socialist youth who wanted to serve the society and nation through her foreign language skills. Zhang's story was inspiring for EFL learners living in 80's not because of her strong-mindedness to overcome the physical disability, but because of her ideal to be a useful member of the society. Against the backdrop of China's desire for recovery from the social and political paralysis after the Cultural Revolution, Zhang was promoted by the government as a role model through official media such as radio and newspapers.

In contrast, the role model in the 1990's was Li Yang who constructed himself as a patriotic learner in pursuit of self-interest. He became an EFL learning celebrity in the 1990's China along with his commercial success in the English training market. Li's English training enterprise encouraged patriotism and personal pursuit of wealth and received huge popularity among EFL learners. His business also became one of the most profitable in China in the late 1990's and the early 2000. Unlike the role model of Zhang promoted by the government in the 1980's, the individual image of Li rose to its fame through the process of the successful marketing of the EFL training business across China. Gao (2014) argues that it reflects the legitimating process of individual pursuit of personal desire and interest in contemporary China.

In the 2000's, Luo Yonghao, who taught English in a private EFL training school, became most popular among netizens through the widespread of his lesson recordings and later his blog on the internet. His popularity derived from his open

criticism and jokes about the current affairs and social issues when teaching English lessons. In his autobiography, Luo portrayed himself as “a denationalized, de-traditionalized and non-conformist individual, as well as a committed idealist who is rational, reflexive and independent thinking” (Gao, p.230). Identified from the previous two learning role models, Luo’s image distinguished himself as critical of and rebellious against cultural traditions and political establishment.

The different experiences of the above three individual EFL learners, as Gao (2014) argued, were situated in the times when they became famous. The evolution of the path to national popularity from the 80’s to the 90’s and to the 2000’s implied that learning English had turned from a national strategy into the individual pursuit of interest.

2.4.2 Imagined Communities and Investment of Chinese EFL Learners

As discussed in the previous section, from the Chinese EFL learners’ perspective, English learning nowadays is more considered a way of achieving diverse personal interest and happiness, which is different from the situation 20 years ago when EFL learning carried one’s patriotic feelings for the nation and contributions to the society. This conceptual change of EFL learning from the national to personal interests agrees with Yan’s (2009) observation of the evolution of Chinese society’s individualization. In the past 10 years, Chinese EFL learners’ identities have drawn enormous research attention, revealing multiple aspects of the learner identity and the

complex social conditions within which learners are situated (e.g., Norton & Gao, 2008; Gu, 2008; Xu, 2012.).

2.4.2.1 International and Modern Communities

Gu's (2010) study provided the understanding of the impacts of English language learning on Chinese learners' construction of national identities. This study took the view that the national identities were discursively constructed by the EFL students through three stages in the process of EFL learning: (1) a mania for western cultures; (2) a burgeoning awareness of the richness of the mother culture and of the threat of "linguistic imperialism"; (3) a reconciliation between national identity and global identity. As learners' awareness of Chinese culture increases over time, they vary their positions in relation to English learning, turning from a Western culture admirer to an antagonist of foreign things, to a global and national citizen. According to Gu, learning English plays a significant role in constructing the national identities of L2 learners. The participants in the study "developed a stronger sense of national identity as their English proficiency permits them greater access to information and as they constantly compare and contrast Chinese and western cultures" (Gu, 2010, p.65). It suggests that learning English is a process of knowing about other cultures and then comparing them with learners' home cultural and historical heritage.

Taking a different view from that in the above study, Zhang (2011) focused on the national, the regional and the individual identity constructions in the context of China's preparing and hosting the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Before this biggest

international event in China's history, there was a widespread craze for English learning among people of different ages and from different walks of life in the host city of Beijing and across China. In learning English, the Chinese people wanted to present to the world a harmonious nation, an internationalized and modernized city of Beijing, and a global population. This national movement of English learning was embedded in China's persistent dream to become an Olympic power, which was considered a feasible way to regain the national pride and national identity. This study demonstrated the strong national and individual desires to integrate into and be accepted by the international community.

The national identity seems to be one of the major themes in the study of Chinese EFL learner identities. The Chinese history of the 100 years before the 80's was filled with consecutive revolutions, wars and political movements. China did not regain its lawful rights in the United Nations until 1971. The Chinese people, who had lived in a county ruined by wars and revolutions and isolated from the international community, had strong desires to revive the nation and to live a life with dignity. Against such a historical backdrop, EFL learning becomes a way to construct a national identity either through comparing the Chinese culture with others (Gu, 2010) or through presenting a global and modern image to the world (Zhang, 2011). This national identity consists of the self-recognition of the Chinese culture and heritage, and the desires to participate in the imagined international and global community.

2.4.2.2 Investment in Diverse Communities

In contrast to the research interest in Chinese EFL learners' national identity, some authors focus on the identities and imagined communities based on personal social lives.

Gao, Zhao, Cheng and Zhou (2007) investigated how a group of EFL learners developed their self-identity through the process of constructing their own learning community on the internet. The learners collaborated to create and maintain the cohesion of their own English learning community through their persistent negotiation and participation in the online community. This virtual community was different from the traditional learning site of the classroom at schools and universities that were controlled and ruled by teachers, textbooks and tests. This online English club was more than an English learning site to improve their language skills. It was a social community for EFL learners where their "inner needs for social exchanges and assertion in English" (Gao, 2007, p.267) could be satisfied. In this imagined community, the participants felt secure to express their reflections of life experiences and listen to others. This online learning community was a new path to learning in which autonomous learning played a significant role.

The active participation in EFL learning is also demonstrated in a study by Gao, Cheng and Kelly (2008) investigating students' regular presence at an English learning event. By attending the English speaking event every week, the students exchanged their experiences and thinking and formed their social groups. English was perceived as the means to attain self-promotion and self-development and a tool to

gain desired social status and identity. This weekly event was a site for learners to develop their sense of ownership of English and voiced their future vision. The discussion event was a site for socialization, fostering individual changes and developing new identities. These persistent participants conceptualized English learning as access to an emerging imagined community of educated bilingual Chinese elites who were different from the majority of monolingual Chinese.

Another study showed that Chinese college students constructed an imagined community of high social status people living in cities (Gao, 2008). Students worked hard in English learning in the anticipation that they were able to wear “leather shoes” rather than “straw sandals” in the future. Shoes and straw sandals are emblematic of two communities in the student’s imagination-- urban residents in higher social status and peasants in the lower status.

Xu (2012) investigated the transforming process of professional identity development of novice EFL teachers from the initial imagined identities formed in the pre-service stage to the practiced identities constructed in the novice stage. The findings show that novice EFL teachers often construct imagined community of language experts, learning facilitators and spiritual guides before starting their teaching practice. However, this community is very likely to collapse at the beginning stage of teaching. In most of the cases in the study, novice teachers encountered “reality shock”- their initial imagined community collapsed. They gave up investing in the initial imagined community and transformed to identities of routine performers

and problem analyzers.

Based on his analysis of a writer's life experiences in Urumqi in Northwest China during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Gao (2011) argued that English learning was a spiritual adventure and religious experience for Liu, a junior middle school boy, who regarded English as gospel and his English teacher as the Messiah leading him out of a chaotic and dehumanizing world. English learning "becomes a path for Liu to associate himself with an imagined world of love and compassion, and empowers him to grow and transform himself into a man of dignity" (p.435). The English learner, in this case, invested in learning English, without anticipating returns of money and materials, but seeking love, dignity and power. This perspective is resonated in Kaplan's (1994) discussion of her French teaching.

Moments like this one make me think that speaking a foreign language is, for me and my students, a chance for growth, for freedom, a liberation from the ugliness of our received ideas and mentalities. (Kaplan, 1994, p.211)

Both Gao (2011) and Kaplan (1994) in their studies conceptualized learning a foreign language as a site for taking refuge from the cruel and ugly reality and a site of the mental home of security and freedom.

2.4.3 Imagined Communities: Diverse or Homogeneous

The above review of the previous research on Chinese EFL learner identities show that Chinese EFL learners constructed diverse imagined communities and thus

diverse desired identities in EFL learning. EFL learning has allowed the learners in China opportunities to access the alternative sources of cultural and symbolic capital with which they are able to pursue their own interest and happiness (Norton, & Gao, 2008; Gao, 2012).

However, there seems to be a tendency among Chinese EFL learners to imagine a community of modern urban elites. This imagined community is characterized by the material wealth, high social status and good education. The community members are bilingual/multilingual urban citizens, and have frequent access to the international communities. We cannot understand such a similar constructing of imagined communities by Chinese EFL learners without considering the modern history of China before the 80's. After experiencing two World Wars and several civil wars, the New China was founded in 1949. It then followed several movements, the Famine and the Cultural Revolution. Not until the late 70's, could the Chinese people live a life without wars and political movements. It is no wonder that the people who were born in 80's and 90's desire for a wealthier and more decent life than their elder generation. Learning English and owning this legitimate cultural and symbolic capital provides them chances to pursue different lives from their parents and grandparents. Although it can be understood that Chinese EFL learners' construction of a wealthy and educated elite community shows their desires to live a better life than their parent generation's, both the EFL teachers and researchers need to take a critical perspective of this trend. Is this imagining good for Chinese EFL

learners in terms of their identity development and English learning in the long run? Why is learning English frequently conceptualized to symbolize being modern, global and urban by the Chinese EFL learners?

This prevalent way of imagining is contrary to the EFL teaching endeavour to develop students' diverse identities and promote their ownership of English (Norton, 2010). It confines students' aspirations and imaginations in EFL learning and prevents their ownership of English. As reported in Li and Simpson's (2013) study, the migrant workers in the U.K. held a strong belief in their professional success as returns of improved language proficiency, but then lost desires to learn English once they found the language learning did not secure the employment. A similar example is in Norton and Kamal's (2003) study that reported an imagining of English speakers as rich and free of problems. This imagining of English speaker community as an ideal of Utopia does not benefit EFL learners in China or elsewhere in the world in their identity development and English learning.

More importantly, the widespread way of imagining EFL learners as a community of wealthy urban elites can represent a new form of the English linguistic hegemony in the EFL context. Certain beliefs, values, ideologies and practices can play implicit roles in students' constructing of the imagined community. For example, the belief in the economic returns of EFL learning may guide EFL students to imagine a community with wealth and properties. This study intends to find out what beliefs and ideologies promote the prevalent way of imagining and how they pose challenges

to rural students in their participation in the EFL imagined community.

2.5 Rural Chinese Students and EFL Learning

Rural students have never been in the centre of the study of the EFL education in China. Coming from the disadvantaged areas, the rural students may want to possess more economic and social resources through learning a foreign language. However, the EFL education hegemonic by nature can pose challenges to rural students in their EFL learning. Certain beliefs and ideologies of EFL learning can be an extension of the linguistic hegemony and thus a barrier to their EFL identity construction. In this part, I situate rural students' EFL learning in the urbanization of China in which rural students are disconnected from the rural community.

2.5.1 Urbanization and Rural China

According to the National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic China (2016), the urban population has grown to 56.1 % of the total in 2015, in contrast to 17.9% in 1978. The growth of urban population is considered a sign for the success of China's national strategy of urbanization within the last four decades to level up productivity by moving labour forces from rural villages to towns and cities (Fang, 2009; Lu, 2012). On average, 20 million of the rural population migrates to towns and cities every year, which is probably the largest rural-urban migration in human history

in terms of its scale and speed. This high-speed of urbanization is driven by the development of market economy and accelerated by government policies. While urbanization results in better living conditions, more job opportunities and more freedom to migrate, it poses enormous challenges for people from the countryside in sticking to their original lifestyles and regional cultures.

Due to the impacts of the large-scale and high speed of the urbanization process, people living in rural regions of China have been experiencing radical life changes that have never happened to their elder farming generations who were economically tied to fields and forbidden by law to migrate to other places. Though the rural poverty population decreases and family income increase within the last few decades, people have to deal with anxiety and uncertainty caused by radical transformations of rural lifestyles and farming cultures that have been developed and inherited for thousands of years (Chen, 2015). Emergent questions to answer include: whether to stick to farming the fields or leave to be a migrant worker in the city; whether to bring children along to the city or leave them behind; whether to leave aged parents alone in the village; whether to come back to the rural home when growing older... The list of questions could be endless about dealing with the changes of life, family, work and unknown future.

Yan (2009) argues that China nowadays is a multi-layered society where diverse spatial and temporal features mix in the same region at the same time. People from rural areas are situated in such conditions have to cope with the mix of

conditions, learning to enjoy the newly offered freedom without much support. They have more access to opportunities and material resources, but are also confronted with risks, conflicts and confusions. Urbanization, for people from rural China, is not only a term of economics, but the pain of leaving home behind and the anxiety of facing the strange world.

2.5.2 School Combining Policy and Rural Students

The imbalanced distribution of educational resources between the rural and urban places exists in many parts of the world. The demand for qualified teachers, the high drop-out rate of students, the insufficient materials for teaching and learning, and the poor school facilities are common problems for rural schools. More importantly, in the process of China's rapid urbanization, rural schools and rural students are greatly influenced by the "School Combining Policy", a reform to re-distribute the elementary and secondary schools in rural areas. Before the mid 1980's, almost every village had its own elementary school and every township its own secondary school. Under the policy of school combining, a large number of rural schools were either closed up or combined. As of 2009, the number of elementary schools in rural villages and townships had strikingly dropped by half (Liu, 2011). This reform, claimed by the government, rearranged and optimized the distribution of educational resources in order to reduce the gap between the rural and the urban areas. In practice, rural schools were closed, combined or moved to villages and towns of a larger population.

Many studies (e.g., Liu, 2011; Xu, 2015; Zhou, 2012) pointed out that the governments at different levels benefited from the “School Combing Policy” in saving the educational budget at the costs of rural students, rural families and rural education. Removing schools from villages led to such problems as the students’ safety on the way to school, the rural family’s increased financial burden of boarding and transportation, the oversize of classes and schools, and the teachers’ heavy work load. Consequently, many elementary school students from remote places need to commute between villages every day. Some have to start their residence at school at an early age of 11 or 12 in Grade 4 if the distance to the school is too long to travel everyday. The more education the rural students want to receive, the farther they need to be away from home and the less time they can spend with their family. An elementary school student living in residence often visits home every weekend, while a junior high school student pays a visit home once a month and a senior high student every few months. Typically, when rural students enter the university, they have longer years of living in residence than their peers.

The “School Combing Policy” also exerts impacts on individual development. Qin and Zeng (2014) argue that rural schools nowadays are alienated from rural communities, and the rural family loses its completeness. Most rural students have to leave their families at an early age to pursue education, at the cost of losing parental care, family life and family education. This will make negative influences on students’ physical and mental health (Li, 2011) and personality development (Zhou, 2014). It is

hard to imagine how a young aged student from rural areas deals with issues resulting from breaking away from the family and the community while competing for academic excellence.

More importantly, hidden behind closedown and combining rural schools is the forces of transferring educational resources away from countryside towards towns and cities, leaving financial, social and cultural costs to students, families and communities in rural areas. According to Zhao and Wu (2015), the rural school in China plays an important role in distributing and maintaining rural culture. The absence of school from rural communities creates the new crisis in the declining rural culture. Under the hegemony of urban culture, rural students lose their spiritual sustenance while rural culture is underscored. The fading and collapsing of rural culture call for breaking the cultural binary of urban and rural with urban in the centre. Dai and Long (2014) suggested that rural schools should be based in the enhanced rural culture and education in rural areas should be combined with rural culture. It is urgent to integrate rural culture in education for the benefit of rural students and rural communities.

2.5.3 EFL Students from Rural Communities

Students from rural China have long been considered the disadvantaged group in education and the key issue in improving education equity. Compared with their urban peers, rural students generally do not have access to high quality education,

sufficient family support for their learning and useful social networking for their job prospects. This discrepancy becomes a more serious problem in rural students' EFL learning. Studies show that students from rural areas lack motivations in learning English, show poor performance in listening and speaking skills, weak language knowledge base (Wang & Li, 2007). While finding it extremely difficult to achieve academic success in the school subject of English, rural students develop emotional barriers such as fear, anxiety and even resistance toward English learning (Li, 2010).

According to the few studies on the disadvantaged group of EFL learners from rural China, the learning frustration of rural student is the result of their lack of economic and social capital and the regional discrepancy of education quality (Li, 2010; Wang & Li, 2007). Li (2010) emphasized rural students' deficiency of the dominant cultural capital and their difficult access to the valued capital due to various forms of exclusion and constraints. This finding is in agreement with that in Hamid's study (2009) of the rural Bangladesh students whose economic, social and cultural capitals played important roles in their academic achievement in English. While raising the awareness of rural students' disadvantages in EFL learning, these studies strengthened the view that rural students' frustration is the result of social and educational inequality. Under the framework of social inequality, the rural students' challenges in EFL learning have been attributed to their deficiency of capital and resources.

2.5.4 Identities of Rural Students as EFL Learners

Although rural student EFL learning becomes a serious issue in education, only a limited number of studies focus their attention on the identity development of this group of learners who learn a foreign language in disadvantaged social, economic and educational conditions. Among the few, Gao's (2008) study reported how the rural students in an urban college invested their hard work in learning English. The study results showed that rural students had a strong desire to participate in an imagined community of richer urban people with more favorable materials and social returns. The students from rural areas worked extremely hard in English learning, in the anticipation that they would wear "shoes" rather than "straw sandals" in the future. Shoes and straw sandals are emblematic of two imagined communities—rich urban residents of higher social status and poor peasants in lower status respectively. A similar finding is found in Gu's (2008) study of a rural student's participation in the urban Christian community where there were Christians from English-speaking countries. The rural students used English to establish their legitimacy in the Christian community which they perceived to be urban, educated and more powerful than the community they were originally from. Their desires were prominent to become empowered through their participation in the English-speaking communities.

A significant finding based on the two studies discussed above is that rural Chinese students often have a strong desire to learn English and construct new

identities in EFL learning. However, I have two concerns about the study results in relation to my understanding of rural students' challenges in EFL learning. Firstly, the emphasis on rural students' agency and active participation in EFL learning English contributes little to improving the EFL education for the benefit of rural students. Considering the large number of rural students who are disadvantaged in education and employment due to their unsatisfactory performance in EFL learning, their desire to learn English does not change the inequality between rural and non-rural students. The rural students can cherish as beautiful dreams and aspirations in EFL learning as their peers', but are often confronted with more challenges in EFL learning. We need to pay more attention to the subtle forces in EFL education that pose challenges to the rural students in their EFL learning. We need to reflect on the EFL education that is initiated for the purpose of educational equity but often turns out to sustain the inequality. The second concern is that rural students construct a similar imagined community to those by their peers in the city (Gao et al., 2008) and in the periphery countries (Norton & Kamal, 2003). The identity of urban elites who are wealthy, educated and superior is unanimously imagined in English learning. I question this similar way of imagining of EFL students from different cultures and different socio-cultural backgrounds. While the identity construction process is active and independent, there must be some subtle elements that influence students' decision-making in their identity imagining.

2.6 Debates over EFL Teaching in China

Although the emancipatory role of EFL learning is more emphasized in Chinese EFL learners' construction of diverse identities, EFL teaching practice in China has been in a dilemma of teaching pedagogy between the Western and the Chinese agenda. The studies are well documented on debates over what types of English teaching and learning are better fit for Chinese students (e.g., Li, 2007; Mott-Smith, 2013; Tian & Lowe, 2012), revolving around whether the Western or the Chinese pedagogical agenda should be followed and whether the Western or the Chinese learning norms are more effective and the new practices of EFL teaching and learning in China. These debates push the EFL education in China forward towards a better way in which the social and cultural development can be obtained and the English cultural hegemony minimized.

2.6.1 Criticism of EFL Teaching in China

With the growth of Chinese international students in such English-speaking countries as Canada and the United States, their learning behaviors in Western academic contexts have evoked wide discussion on the EFL teaching and learning in China.

In Mott-Smith's (2013) study, the Chinese international students in a U.S.

university memorized templates, sentence structures and original sentences, and then used them in the English writing test. Such rote learning strategies were taught to them but are considered plagiarism in the Western Universities. A similar finding is presented by Tian and Lowe (2012) in their study of how well Chinese students are prepared for academic study in a British university. They found that the teaching practices in China did not prepare the students well for academic writing at the undergraduate level in British universities. This study indicated a series of teaching practices in China as attributive to the issue, such as formal testing emphasizing memorization, little efforts to prevent plagiarism and lack of attention to students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Another concern regarding Chinese international students' academic study in Western universities is their reluctance to give critical comments. According to Qian and Krugly-Smolka (2008), Chinese graduate students in Canadian universities were reluctant to evaluate the literature critically in writing the literature review. This behavior was interpreted in terms of Chinese traditional culture of learning from and respecting the ideas of the authority. Literature reading as a learning process was seen as the reason for students' absence of critical comments on literature.

Instead of making prompt judgments, the above studies critically analyze the Chinese students' behavior and the EFL training that they received. The widely practiced teaching norms that overstress imitation, memorization, and model answers for formal tests, coupled with little attention to combating plagiarism and insufficient

feedback from teachers, are responsible for students' frustration in academic writing in the Western academic setting which emphasizes originality, imagination, and critical thinking. Targeting improving Chinese students' academic writing in Western academic context, these studies draw on a cross-cultural framework to understand students' behavior and the EFL training they received before landing in the hosting country. These studies all call for Western instructors' and professors' awareness of their students' culture of learning and positioning their behavior in the global context.

When moving to an English-speaking country, these students bring with them the beliefs about the processes of writing and learning which may not meet the expectations of the western academic context (Li, 2007). In the following section, I will discuss the learning norms and cultures in China and their influences on Chinese students' EFL learning.

2.6.2 Learning Norms: the Western or the Chinese?

The above discussion shows that Chinese international students have difficulties in meeting the expectations of Western academic setting. Jin and Cortazzi (2006) claimed that it was because the Chinese students framed their EFL learning within the Chinese culture of learning at least at the beginning stage of the study. The Chinese culture of learning is typical of strategies of imitation, memorization and repetitive practice.

Studies of English skills development show that Chinese EFL learners are

largely dependent upon repetitive practices of imitating, memorizing and leaning text by heart (e.g., Gui, 2005; Mott-Smith, 2013; Ding, 2007; Yang, 1999). Opposite to the criticism that repetitive practice and memorization limit students' imagination and creativity, (e.g., Mott-Smith, 2013; Qian & Krugly-Smolka, 2008; Tian & Lowe, 2012), Ding's (2007) investigation of successful learner experience indicates that these skills are perceived as legitimate strategies. Based on their learning narratives, a group of Chinese students attributed their success in a national English speech competition to repetitive practice and hard work. They learned by heart collocations and sequences for productive use in writing and speech. They also watched the same movies or TV series several times, imitated the intonation patterns, and memorized lines, to the extent that when they spoke English, movie lines popped out naturally. However, because using these strategies require long-term and intensive practice, only a small proportion of students really apply it to their learning. Furthermore, Chinese students have strong beliefs in cognitive strategies of repetitive practice and memorization particularly in learning grammar and vocabulary as the most important part of English, as indicated in Yang's (1999) study of the relationship of Chinese student learning beliefs to their learning strategy uses. However, even though students believed repetitive practice and memorization more effective strategies, only a few of students really applied them due to the long-term hard work they required. Another conflict is between the strong interest in English oral skills and the intense worry about them as a result of the fear of making mistakes.

On the part of EFL instructors, there can be both the opposition to applying the Western way of instruction directly to EFL students in China and the stance of engaging local needs in EFL teaching. Gui (2005) appears to be a defender of conventional EFL teaching in the Chinese context arguing that EFL learners in China learn English to pass diverse English tests and, therefore, their intrinsic motivation remains relatively low. Only the strategies effective for tests should be encouraged, such as memorization and repetition. Her defense of Chinese conventional norms of English teaching and learning can be interpreted as the representative of the teaching ideology against the western hegemony. However, since she simplifies students' needs for EFL learning to scoring high in exams and tests, her argument is more of a justification of the international and China's English tests. On the contrary, Shi (2009) advocates adapting the Western ways of teaching to the local needs. In her study, expatriate teachers' teaching meets with Chinese students' resistance with regard to their deficient knowledge about how student learn and how the local English tests should be prepared. The teaching of critical thinking and writing in direct Western style encounters some students' criticism and resistance. In Shi's view, Western teachers need to reflect on the Anglo-centric teaching practice and incorporate other cultures of learning to serve diverse needs in different teaching contexts.

No matter how different these ideas are, EFL education in China is regarded as a fixed, unified and stable cultural practice in conflict with Western norms of language teaching. These views overlook the ongoing changes in EFL practice in the

socio-cultural context of a fast-paced China. A common standpoint underlying these studies is that the Western way of instruction is inevitably conflictive with the Chinese culture of learning and teaching, and therefore, teachers must either take one side or to mediate the conflicts between them. As a result, the complex relationship between Chinese and Western cultures of learning and teaching is reduced to dualistic categories of tidy binaries. The Western norm of foreign language instruction cannot be reduced to communicative teaching approach (Littlewood, 1981). Similarly, the Chinese learning culture goes beyond rote memorization. EFL practice in China requires close investigation with regard to its complexity, multiplicity and fluidity.

2.6.3 Diverse and Changing Practices

In contrast to stereotyping the EFL teaching and learning in China into one fixed cultural norm (e.g., Ding, 2007; Gui, 2005; Mott-Smith, 2013), Jin and Cortazzi (2006) positioned English learning in a larger picture of cultures of learning in China, emphasizing the socio-cultural aspects of key practices, expectations and interpretations of learning, as well as the diversity of learning practices. As an integral part of elementary, secondary and postsecondary education, the EFL learning in China is labeled by the Chinese cultures of learning. From Jin and Cortazzi's (2006) viewpoint, Chinese students' ways of learning English, such as strategies of repeated practice and imitation of teachers' model, are associated with a Chinese identity that has been constructed during the process of Chinese literacy development over years.

...literacy in Chinese-- commonly considered a badge of Chinese identity by Chinese themselves-- is acquired with well-defined practices of learning including...demonstration, modeling, tracing, repeated copying, and ultimately active memorization... Such practices for calligraphy in a context of linguistic and educational socialization are likely to influence children's general ideas of learning including repeated practice and mimetic production of teachers' models or textbook examples, with the concomitant idea that being creative or artistic can only happen later after precise mastery of basic forms. (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006, p.9)

Jin and Cortazzi (2006) demonstrated that Chinese students' ways of learning were shaped by their ways of Chinese literacy development, and their EFL learning was, therefore, inevitably associated with this culture of learning emphasizing imitation, repetition and memorization. On the other hand, they focused on the diversity of English learning practices within Chinese cultures of learning. For example, the teachers' authority over the class is based on their expert knowledge, skills, roles of modeling in learning, and moral behavior, while the students' role is to make efforts to remember and learn the models reflectively. While collective and mass learning is typical of English learning in China, self-study and informal learning plays an important part in high achievement. Repeating aloud with concentration before or after English class is regarded as independent learning in order for a precise mastery of English before productivity and creativity occur. Besides English class, EFL

learning may take place in the virtual communities that are voluntarily constructed online (Gao, 2007), or in the “English corner”, a park, a café or street corner where learners gathered weekly to practise speaking English.

This argument on the diversity of EFL learning practices and learners is shared by Shi (2006) who found that Chinese students showed little difference from their Western peers in terms of active participation in learning and dynamic interaction with teachers. She challenged the conventional stereotypes of Chinese culture of learning as shaped by Confucianism and Chinese learners as passive, quiet, submissive and disciplined in the existing literature. Based on her quantitative data, she argued that impacts of Confucianism on the Chinese culture of learning were decreasing. Jin and Cortazzi (2006) pointed out that the learning norm in the Confucian tradition was a complex and dynamic system of diverse activities which encouraged continuous efforts, an independent mind, and an ability to doubt preconceived ideas. Rather than a model promoting obedience, the Chinese learning norm is “a deeply reflective, inquiry-based, experiential way of learning” (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006, p.13)

Jin and Cortazzi’s argument (2006) on the diversity of EFL learning norms is supported by a series of studies on Chinese students’ EFL learning beliefs and learning strategies. Chang (2008) investigated the listening strategies that the students used to carry out tasks in various listening tests. The study found the students’ use of strategies was related to their anxiety levels. While the anxious students preferred a bottom-up or a balance of bottom-up and top-down strategy, the non-anxious students

varied their use of strategies in response to different listening tasks. In Rao's (2005) study, six categories of learning strategies were discovered to be associated with gender in the Chinese context. For example, female students spent more extracurricular time in English learning and used strategies more frequently than boys. While strategies used by boys were in a wider range aiming to improve communicative competence and control emotions, girls used more strategies for following the instruction. Furthermore, Yang's (1999) study found that students' learning beliefs were correlated with their uses of strategies of memorization, compensation and social strategies.

In addition to the diverse learning practices discussed above, the ongoing changes in EFL teaching and learning are added to the complexity of Chinese cultures of learning. As Jin and Cortazzi (2006) have observed, within the Chinese context, the communicative teaching approach and student-centered class are promoted by the education authorities in the form of official curricula. The new emphasis on English learning is put on cultivating creativity and critical thinking, developing motivations and confidence, and fostering competence of intercultural communication (Yang & Fleming, 2013).

Take my own teaching experience as an EFL lecturer at a university in Yunnan province China for example. College students are provided with more options and opportunities to choose which foreign language to learn and what kind of learning materials to use. The English program consists of class instruction, online learning and

extracurricular learning activities. Online learning system provides abundant learning resources for students to choose an alternative channel for teacher-student communication. Extracurricular events such as speech competitions, seminar series, and student exchange programs are added to the one-dimensional college EFL program. Students' performance in all three parts of the program makes up their final grades at the end of the semester. Another reform in the university is that students are able to choose which EFL instructors' class they want to join through reading about the instructors' background online and the two-week class auditioning at the beginning of the semester before making a decision.

Changing practices of teaching and learning English also take place in an overseas academic context where Chinese students pursue their post-secondary education such as in British universities (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). Chinese students studying in Western universities will change their learning practices when they are confronted with considerable challenges particularly in academic essay writing and participation in discussion in seminars, in order to meet the assessment standards in that context. Overseas study is an important factor influencing student learning practice.

2.7 Research Questions

2.7.1 The Problematic of Constructing Similar Imagined Communities

Considering the large population of EFL learners and the complex social

conditions of China, it is surprising to find that the Chinese learners tend to construct a similar EFL imagined community typical of high social status, good education and urban professions. This is contradictory to the goal of EFL education to develop students' capacity for imagining diverse identities (Norton, 2010). Although other identities and imagined communities are constructed by Chinese EFL students, the national identity for example (Gu, 2010), the modern-urban-elite imagining appears dominant in the context of China's EFL education. Taking a closer look into the constructing of this imagining, I find a series of conceptual binaries in it: urban vs. rural, elite vs. ordinary, and international vs. regional. In these binaries, furthermore, the former is often assumed to be superior and the latter inferior. For example, living an urban lifestyle is considered much better than living a rural one, and an ambition to be outstanding is more appreciated than to be an ordinary person. Among the Chinese EFL learners, these assumptions have been taken for granted and out of question.

The desire to be the modern urban elites drives EFL learners to keep on investing in EFL learning. However, if it becomes the dominant way of imagining the among EFL learners, it can be problematic. This dominant way confines EFL learners' imagining to certain identities, and prevents them from developing others. For the learners from rural areas, additional concerns are based on the oppositional concepts in the binaries structuring the imagined community. There is nothing wrong that rural students aspire to become the modern urban elites through EFL learning. What I am concerned is whether this aspiration promotes their EFL learning or poses additional

challenges to their learning. In this study, I am going to explore this dominant way of imagining—how it impacts rural students in their investment in EFL learning and what a typical imagined community looks like in their eyes.

2.7.2 The Problematic of China's EFL Education

Though there are a variety of reasons for this dominant way of EFL imagining, the EFL educators need to ask how the current EFL education allows and promotes this imagining while other ways are discouraged. In the case of rural students, the EFL education that predominantly promotes the development of urban identities can be problematic because it disconnect and dislocate the rural students from the rural community and the rural culture. The EFL teachers and researchers need to critically reflect on the taken-for-granted theories and practices of EFL education in terms of its relationship to the dominant way of identity imagining among students.

I made a list of conceptual binaries that shape the current context of China's EFL education in Table 1. These dichotomies are summarized based on the discussion of the issues in the EFL education in China in this chapter—globalization and linguistic imperialism, language commodification and language ideology, urbanization and rural culture, and EFL teaching approaches and learning strategies.

The four major binaries listed in Table 1 are the globalization, the language ideology, the urbanization, and the teaching approach and learning strategies. Within each pair, there are two related oppositional concepts with one in the dominant center

and the other the dominated. The opposition that is dominated is judged and evaluated by how close it is to the central one: the nearer, the better; the further, the worse. Take urbanization for example. Knowledge and culture about the city are considered superior to those of the rural. The more urban-like is considered better. On the contrary, concepts further away from the urban are considered not valuable and not right. In the dichotomy of language commodification, the role of English as economic and symbolic capital is in the centre of the educational system and teaching practice, while aspects such as aesthetics of literary works and appreciation of humanistic values are marginalized. The hierarchical structure forces the dominated opposition to come closer to the centre.

Table 1. Binaries that structure the context of China's EFL education

Binary items	The dominant/central	The dominated
globalization	global/international knowledge and culture	local knowledge and culture
language ideology	a tool for more material and symbolic returns	non-instrumental (e.g., literature, humanity)
urbanization	city, modern, developed	rural, underdeveloped
teaching approach and learning strategy	Western, communicative approach, critical thinking	traditional approach, repetitive practice and memorization

Structured by these binaries, the current EFL education in China privileges the

cultures and concepts related to the global and the urban, and promotes the instrumentalist language ideology and the communicative teaching approach. Meanwhile, the regional and rural values and the traditional EFL pedagogy are downplayed. In the context of this EFL education, there are subtle forces promoting students to be closer to the so-called better centre—the international, the urban and the outstanding, no matter what socio-cultural backgrounds they come from. These binaries embedded in the EFL education contribute to students' similar conceptualization of EFL community as an English Utopia of wealthy, educated, high-status people. As an integral part of the EFL education, the perspectives of the researchers and teachers are greatly framed by these binaries too. It is difficult for them to achieve new insights and search new solutions without awareness of the hidden forces of these binaries and disrupting these oppositional concepts.

2.7.3 Research Questions

As discussed above, the issue of rural students' EFL learning is complex and the context of China's EFL education is multi-layered and multi-dimensional. Rural Chinese students face more challenges in EFL learning than their urban peers as a result of unequal access to and limited possession of economic and educational resources. A series of conceptual binaries that structure the EFL education in China can exert subtle forces and sustain the inequality. However, little is known about what forces of the EFL education pose challenges to rural students in their EFL learning and

in what ways.

The purpose of this research is to explore how rural Chinese students understand the connection between the challenge in EFL learning and the structural system of EFL education in China. This study investigates what challenges rural students have experienced in EFL learning, and how they relate their challenges with the context of EFL education in China. The major research questions are as follows.

1. What challenges do rural Chinese postsecondary students have experienced in their EFL learning throughout their years of formal education?
2. How do they connect their challenges in EFL learning with the structural system of EFL education? What educational concepts and teaching practices are constructed as relevant to their challenges?
3. What kind of EFL teaching can better support rural Chinese students?

In this study, I explore the subtle space between the challenge in learning EFL and the structural system of EFL education through rural students' lens. The results of the study based on rural student's partial and situated understandings will not only reveal how they think and learn about the current context of EFL education in China, but also inform what is recognized as authoritative knowledge and what is as marginalized or degraded. This study also expects to provide theoretical and pedagogical implications for developing an EFL education in China that promotes social equity for the disadvantaged EFL learners rather than enhancing the inequality in education and employment.

Chapter 3 Methodology

This chapter illustrates the methodology that is applied to investigate rural students' understanding of the challenge in EFL learning in relation to the context of China's EFL education. At the beginning of the chapter, I present the rationale for the selection of the research paradigm and the design of research. I then describe the procedures of data collection and data analysis. The ethical considerations, the roles of the researcher and a brief summary of the chapter are provided at the end.

3.1 Paradigm

3.1.1 Poststructuralism

I framed the research problem in the paradigm of poststructuralism. Merriam and Tisdell, (2015) present their assumption of four epistemological perspectives in research: positivist/ postpositivist, interpretive/ constructivist, critical, and poststructuralist/ postmodern. A research framed in a poststructuralist paradigm often questions rationality, scientific methods and certainties. Poststructuralism questions the assumption that there is one single "truth" that can be known and proven legitimate through scientific methods. Poststructural theorists are interested in searching for diversity and plurality of the human experience and ways of understanding. Lather (2006) demonstrated a paradigm chart of qualitative research

particularly in the educational field—positivist, interpretive, critical and poststructural. In addition to questioning the epistemological perspective of knowable truth, Lather's view of poststructuralism emphasizes awareness of complexity and nuance. Furthermore, poststructuralist research questions the validity constructed and secured by the dominant logical positivism. Poststructuralism includes diverse approaches to destabilizing the homogeneous standards and practices. Lather (2006) claims that poststructural studies "demonstrate how validity is a 'limit-question' of research, one that repeatedly resurfaces, one that can neither be avoided nor resolved" (p.52). As in Grbich's (2003) discussion of new approaches in social research, the emphasis of poststructural research is on "deconstruction, the tracing of historical discourse and the reordering of knowledge" (p.64). Therefore, poststructural research is not "providing a recipe for establishing legitimacy", but calling into question "the crux of the issue: the claims of science to a certain privilege in terms of authoritative knowledge" (Lather, 2006, p.52). Poststructural research also problematizes understanding issues through binary opposites, such as objective and subjective, good and evil, and male and female. The binary opposites, as Grbich (2003) suggests, contribute to structuring "the dominant discourses which control and constraint thoughts and actions" (p.40). Poststructuralism seeks out the complexities of dichotomies and binaries. Furthermore, poststructuralism is a conceptual framework for education that helps students to:

explore the connection between who they are as individuals and the structural

systems of privilege and oppression (such as gender, race and class) that partially inform how they think, how they teach and learn or construct knowledge on an individual level, and inform what is constructed as “canon” or “official knowledge base” of a particular field. (Tisdell, 1998, p.139)

Similarly, poststructuralism is significant in researching people’s understanding of the connection between their identity and the social context.

This conceptual framework enables me to attain a more nuanced understanding of the connections between EFL education and rural students’ challenges based on the knowledge constructed by rural student individuals. Framed in the poststructural paradigm, my study attempts to disrupt conceptual binaries, and question the authority of official knowledge in EFL education in China, while foregrounding rural students’ partial and situated knowledge. I will discuss the application of poststructuralism to my research in more detail in the next section.

3.1.2 Poststructuralism in My Research

I made the choice of the poststructural paradigm based on my purpose of research which is exploring the experiences and narratives of Chinese students from rural areas and examining their challenges in EFL learning from a new perspective. It is a common problem that rural students’ often present lower EFL school achievements than the non-rural students do and lose opportunities for a better school or a better job, as my former student described at the beginning chapter of the thesis. A

series of studies explained this phenomenon that rural students possess limited economic and social resources and deficient cultural capital (Li, 2010; Hamid, 2009; Wang & Li, 2007). This explanation justifies rural students' lower EFL school achievement and thus their losses of opportunities for education and jobs. In this research, I problematize this justification of rural students' challenges in EFL learning, and seek more nuanced perspectives on the issue.

First, I adopt the paradigm of poststructuralism to seek why and how rural students' challenge in EFL learning becomes a problem, instead of asking what the problem is as in the existing studies on rural students' EFL learning in the Chinese EFL context (e.g., Li, 2010; Wang & Li, 2007). As reviewed in Chapter 2, the studies documented on rural students' EFL learning, framed in a quantitative paradigm, demonstrate variables and factors such as motivations and emotions that lead to rural students' low proficiency. They provide a description of various aspects of the issue of rural students' EFL learning. In addition, these studies regarded rural students' low proficiency in EFL as a result of their deficiency in social and economic resources. It cannot be denied that rural students are in a disadvantaged position in EFL learning compared to their urban peers. However, this monolithic positioning of rural students, more or less, leads to a narrowly focused understanding of this problem. In this research, I am curious about why and how rural students' EFL learning becomes a problem, instead of accepting it simply as a consequence of the unbalanced distribution of social resources. It requires a different paradigm of research to explore

the origin of the issue of rural students' EFL learning—what their challenges are, how they understand these challenges, and who poses these challenges. The paradigm of poststructuralism allows me to shift the angle of research from viewing rural students' EFL learning as a problem to questioning how and why it becomes a problem.

Second, in the research, I attempt to rip open the binaries that have framed the view of issues and problems in the field of EFL teaching and learning in the context of China. As shown in Table 1. Binaries that structure the context of China's EFL education in Chapter 2, issues of EFL teaching and learning in China are often framed by binaries of western/eastern, foreign/local, and urban/rural. Furthermore, one opposition of the binary is always superior to the other. For example, textbooks of English speaking countries, Western teaching approaches and foreign teachers are considered superior to the local equivalent. In this research, I attempt to problematize these binaries that dominate understandings of EFL teaching and learning in contemporary China. Poststructuralism provides a conceptual framework for me to disrupt the western/eastern, rural/urban and successful/unsuccessful dichotomies, and to discover a nuanced perspective of the research problem. In this research, I problematize those binaries embedded in the current EFL teaching and learning in China through exploring the issue of rural student EFL learning.

Another consideration leading to my selection of poststructuralism as a theoretical framework and an analytical tool is my desire to pay attention to the voices of rural students in the EFL education in China. Rural students' voices in education

are rarely heard in China, not to mention in EFL teaching and learning. An important reason may be related to the hidden binaries of globalization and urbanization in EFL teaching and learning. Voices from the local and the rural people are underestimated compared with those from the global and urban. Another reason can be related to the Chinese culture of learning. It is unusual for students to make critical comments about teachers and their teaching (Qian & Krugly-Smolka, 2008). On the contrary, respecting and learning ideas from the authority are greatly valued (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). Since students' views about EFL teaching are not considered valuable in improving teaching, they rarely have opportunities to speak up their voices. Adding the voices of rural students to the research of EFL teaching and learning in China will provide teachers and researchers with new insights into the problems of China's EFL education.

I apply the paradigm of poststructuralism in this study in anticipation of finding nuances on the issue of rural students' EFL learning in China. In addition to providing a perspective on China's EFL education through the lens of rural students, this research is expected to question the standards and practices in the context of the EFL education in China. Although these long-established standards can seem hegemonic to rural students in their EFL learning, I do not view them as repressive forces by which rural students are controlled and restrained. Rather I focus on the productive aspects of these forces in creating students' knowledge, attitudes and desires. According to Foucault (1980), the conception of power goes beyond the force

of saying no.

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.

(p.119)

On the basis of Foucault's conception of power, this study attempts to discover the hidden forces operating through China's EFL education and producing knowledge and discourses of it.

3.2. Research Design

3.2.1 Life Story Research

In line with the poststructural paradigm, I selected the methodology of life story research in carrying out my thesis research. Life story research is "a broad field of research endeavor in the social sciences in which people's lives as a whole, or in part, are data for understanding the complex two-way relationship between self and social context" (Harrison, 2009, p.1). According to Atkinson (1998), life story research is a powerful tool in research on issues of identity, personal development and the social contexts. He defines a life story as:

the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as

completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another. (Atkinson, 1998, p.8)

A life story covers important events, experiences and feelings across time. As well, the storyteller presents his or her subjective interpretation of the self, the context and the relations between them. As a powerful tool in social science research, life story research has been widely adopted in research ranging a wide range of disciplines, such as psychology, education and sociology (e.g., Harrison, 2009; Helms & Thompson, 2004). This research design highlights its advantages in accessing people's voices and tracing the process of an individual's development over a lifetime. The life story is important in the search for new approaches to knowing and teaching in the field of education. Stories are social products. The story-tellers' subjective perspectives of social context are presented through and within the story. Story-telling is also a social act. Atkinson (1998) argues that people tell stories for the social interactive purpose of being "heard, recognized, and acknowledged" (p.7). In order to achieve these aims, individual experiences are dialogically organized and interactively constructed in a story by the story-teller (Harrison, 2009). However, for poststructural theorists, life story is significant in investigating the social context and the structural system constructed by and in storyteller's narratives (Atkinson, 1998; Miller, 2011; Harrison, 2009).

3.2.2 Life Story in Poststructural Research

In poststructural research, *story* plays a significant role in challenging and denying the privilege and validity of authoritative knowledge, identified from *theory* that attempts to establish validity and authority. Davis (2004) questioned the undervaluation of story and demonstrated how stories “promote and impede the anticipation of intelligibility” in the same way the theory did. Stories enable or obstruct the attempt to establish meaning due to their irregularities, obscurities, blind spots and ambiguities. According to Davis (2004), stories can be told and interpreted in different ways, denying the authority of a single reading and highlighting the challenges of establishing meaning.

I adopted life story research in my poststructural thesis research mainly because the nature of story in challenging validity of authoritative knowledge and denying possibility of establishing meaning comes in line with my research purpose of questioning concepts and practices in EFL education that have been regarded as natural and legitimate. As discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, research on rural students’ challenges in EFL learning is stuck in a dilemma of deficiency approach. An alternative research lens is in need to provide more nuanced understanding of their challenge beyond the deficiency in resource and capital. Furthermore, the rural participants’ stories are their situated knowledge of China’s EFL education and contextualized understanding of themselves as EFL learners, providing a vantage

point from which nuances of interactions of EFL education and rural students' challenges in EFL learning can be visualized. As Haraway (1998) argues, since you can only view something from a certain position, the possibility of official knowledge or "the view from nowhere" is challenged. In this study, the rural participants' situated and partial knowledge enables them to question the homogeneous standards and official knowledge in EFL education.

Miller (2011) demonstrated three major approaches to framing and analyzing life stories. The realistic approach aims at theory building through inductive analysis, whereas neopositivist approach focuses on theory testing by deductive analysis. In my thesis research, I applied the third approach to framing and analyzing the life story, the narrative approach. Different from the other two types, this approach prioritizes and analyzes subjectivity rather than controlling and restraining it. In poststructural research, life story is more than a container of participants' life experiences and subjective perceptions. Miller (2011) indicates that qualitative research usually regards participants' answers to specific questions as significant in understanding their experiences and subjectivities, whereas narrative approach is interested in the narrative organization of them—"not only the temporal and causal organization of facts and events considered significant, but also the value judgments that make sense of this particular life experience" (p.15). He presented a triangular model to illustrate how the narrative approach frames and analyzes life stories.

One apex of the triangle is the respondent with their pre-existing subjective and negotiated view of social reality. A second apex of the triangle is the interviewer with an agenda of research interest and goals. The responses to the interviewer's questioning produce the third apex of triangle. (Miller, 2011, p.128)

Therefore, the narrative approach to life stories provides not only understandings of the participant's response to questions, but also insights into the patterns and manners in which the participant perceives his or her situation in social structures.

Taking a poststructural perspective, I regard the life story of EFL learning as an essential means for exploring not only the participant's response to my eliciting questions about their learning experiences, but also the manners in which he or she perceives the EFL education. Based on my research agenda of examining rural students' challenge in EFL learning, I focus on specific ways in which EFL education is discursively narrated and constructed within the stories and explore how the storytellers relate these narrations to their challenges. Based on the poststructural theory, I assume that the rural students' narratives of EFL education as constructed within their stories may provide their contradictory, consistent or nuanced perceptions of EFL education that inform us of what is constructed as the taken-for-granted and authoritative knowledge.

The meaning of life story in the current research is slightly different from the definition by Atkinson (1998) as "the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or

she has lived” (p.8). Since this research project revolves around the issue of rural students’ EFL learning, I define life story in this research specifically as “the story a student participant from rural areas chooses to tell about their experiences with EFL learning”. The life story in my research does not cover a person’s lifetime from birth to the present and beyond, but a rural student’s experience with EFL learning from their initial contact with English, to the present study and future expectations.

3.3 Collection of Stories

3.3.1 Process

My initial step was to get access to potential students who were willing to take part in the study. I attempted to recruit participants from three universities in Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan Province in Southwest China. All three are public universities that admit students from all over China.

Two approaches were applied to spread the information about my study and my recruitment of participants. One is posters (See appendix 1 Recruitment Poster). I posted recruitment advertisements on bulletin boards in and around campuses of the three universities. I put them up on bulletins at the entrance of student residence buildings, classroom buildings, libraries, and canteens.

Another way to recruit participants was to contact postsecondary students through a face-to-face meetings and conversations. This approach was practised with the help of a couple of professors and instructors of the universities who were my

former colleagues and friends. I first asked for their permission for me to introduce my study to their students in the classroom after their class. After getting permission, I entered the classroom, and asked the professor or instructor to leave the classroom. I then started briefing my research to the whole class and distributed the recruitment flyers to the whole class (See Appendix 2 Recruitment Flyer). I emphasized to the class that only students who were originally from rural areas were to be recruited for the research. I also encouraged them to email or call me with the contact information on the flyer if they were interested or had questions to ask. I reassured the students that their participation was entirely voluntary and no academic penalty would be imposed on those who did not participate. I promised the class that their participation in the research was confidential.

The beginning stage of recruitment turned out to be slow. Only a few responses were received from students, most of which were questions on what they were supposed to do and how long the interview would take. I then decided to increase the frequency of the recruiting work. I then repeated putting up recruitment posters around campuses every two weeks. I went to more classes and talked to students more often and for a longer time. As a consequence, more students contacted me. I then went to more classes and reached more potential participants, which greatly improved the efficiency of recruitment.

The second stage was to identify the participants who were originally from rural areas or families and willing to tell their stories of EFL learning. I received

emails and phone calls inquiring about details of their participation, such as the topic, time and form of the interview. I answered their inquiries, and encouraged them to take part in the study. In this initial communication with potential participants, I identified the appropriate participants for the research. I detail the selection criteria and how I use it to recruit the participants in the next part of “Participants”. Eventually, twelve postsecondary students originally from rural areas were willing to take the interview and share their stories of EFL learning.

The third step was to make appointments with those students who were identified as of rural origin for life story interviews. On the interview day, I first handed them the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix 3) and asked them to go through it before signing. I again assured them of their right to withdraw from the interview or the research at any time, and explained how their privacy and confidentiality would be protected. Eight students made their own decision to quit the research before signing the consent form.

After their signing of the consent form, they took the interviews immediately. I interviewed one participant at a time. Each participant took a life story interview to tell his or her story of EFL learning over the time from the first contact with English to the past and to the present. I will discuss my approach to the life story interview in detail in the section “Life Story Interview”. Two places were chosen to be the venue for interviews. One was a quiet lounge in a classroom building in one of the university. Another was a study room of one of the university libraries. Each interview lasted for

about one hour on average. All interviews were recorded by digital voice recorders and saved as audio files on my personal computers.

The interview was in Chinese, the mother tongue of both the interviewees (participants) and the interviewer (the researcher). I then transcribed the interviews and translated the transcripts from Chinese into English. Strategies of back-translation and peer-review were used to improve the rigour of translation (Irvine, Roberts & Bradbury-Jones, 2008). My profession as an English-Chinese translator in China and my study and work experience in Australia and Canada qualified me for being a translator. After translating the transcripts, I sent both the Chinese and English versions to the participant for their confirmation of the transcripts and verification of the translation.

3.3.2 Participants

My research problem is the issue of rural students' EFL learning, and therefore the participants would be postsecondary students who were originally from rural areas. The participants in my research were expected to be distinguished from the rest of the university students with respect to their birthplace, family of origin and their way of living and thinking. They were the students who were originally from rural families and villages and currently studying at the university.

On the basis of the definition of "rural students" I made in Chapter 1, my

conception of the word “rural” is not only a geographical notion of a place away from the city, but also an indication of the rural culture, the agricultural economy and a village lifestyle. I then applied this understanding to my practice of selecting participants. I focused more on students’ blood ties to the rural family and their social and economic relations to the rural community, instead of on their past and current residence region. As discussed in the Literature Review, it is common for rural people and families to move to the city against the backdrop of rapid urbanization of rural China.

I then listed out a series of major questions to be asked when I identified the participants in my research. These questions helped me to single out the participants who were more closely related to the rural family and community. This identification process was performed when the students expressed their interest in participating on the phone or through email, usually a couple of days before the interview. The following questions were asked to identify the participants in the research.

1. Where were you born? Where is your hometown?
2. Do you have farming fields in the hometown? Who takes care of the fields?
3. What do your parents do? Did they farm the fields?
4. Which family member(s) is/are living in the hometown now?
5. Where did you spend your early childhood before going to school?

Among those potential participants interested in participation, I invited those for the interview whose answers to 4 or 5 questions were positive to rural aspects. I eventually recruited twelve university-student participants who were originally from rural areas, and willing to take part in life story interview sharing their experience and understanding of learning English.

Table. 2 Information on participants' age, gender and major

No.	Name	Age	Gender	Major
1	Ping	20	F	Arabic
2	Juan	19	F	Arabic
3	Zhi	20	F	Arabic
4	Huo	20	M	Science of Biology
5	Yu	19	M	Science of Biology
6	Chong	20	M	Chemical Engineering
7	Bei	19	M	Chemical Engineering
8	Hong	20	M	Chemical Engineering
9	Wan	21	M	EFL teaching
10	Duo	19	F	Vietnamese
11	Lei	21	F	Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language
12	Mang	20	F	Lao

Table 3 Participants' changes in school locations and years of EFL learning

No.	Name	Elementary school	Junior high school	Senior high school	Years of EFL learning
1	Ping	village	town	city	11 years
2	Juan	village	town	city	9 years
3	Zhi	grade 1-3 in the home village, and above grades in a town,	town	city	7 years
4	Huo	city	town	town	11 years
5	Yu	village	town	city	7 years
6	Chong	village	town	town	7 years
7	Bei	village	town	city	11 years
8	Hong	grade 1-3 in a village, and above grades in another village	town	town	11 years
9	Wan	village	city	city	11 years
10	Duo	village	town	town	11 years
11	Lei	city	town	town	11 years
12	Mang	village	city	city	7 years

Table 2 shows the basic information on age, gender and major of the twelve participants. All of the participants were undergraduate students in pursuit of their Bachelor's degree at university. Among them were six female students and six male students from the age of 19 to 21. They were from seven different departments:

three of them majoring in Arabic, two in Science of Biology, three in Chemical Engineering, one in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, one in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, one in Lao and one in Vietnamese. Five participants had their majors in a foreign language and another two students studied language teaching. Since these students had relatively plentiful experience with language learning compared with other majors, their stories were expected to present unique insights into the EFL education in China.

All the participants were born in rural families located in rural villages. All of them had experiences of living in different places due to the changes of their school locations, and the changes of their parents' places of work. As seen in Table 3, the participants attended their formal education in different places, and their years of EFL learning varied greatly considering their similar ages.

Most of the participants had their primary school education in the village, the junior high school in the town, the senior high school in the town or city, and the university in the provincial capital city. They often paid a visit home once a month when they studied in the town, and twice a year when they attended a school in the city. The frequency of their home visits generally decreased as they received more education. A discussion on rural students' living in residence can be found in 2.6.2 Urbanization and Education in Rural China in Chapter 2. Two of the participants were a bit different in their school location changes. Huo and Lei were born in villages, but went to the primary school located in the city. Their parents brought them to the

city when they left their villages to work in the city. When Huo and Lei completed their primary school, they were sent to the high school in the town closest to their home village and their grandparents. Their parents still worked in the city then. Furthermore, most of the participants had at least one parent working as a migrant worker in the town or the city. Only a couple of them had both of their parents working in the city or both in the village.

3.3.3 Life Story Interview

The approach I applied to collect students' stories of EFL learning is based on McAdams's Life Story Interviews (McAdams, 2008, 2013; McAdams & Guo, 2014). This model provides a guideline for a semi-structured and open-ended interview of life stories. Seven categories of specific interview questions are made to explore various aspects of human lives: life chapters, key scenes in life story, future scripts, challenges, personal ideology, life themes and reflections. And under each category are a sub-group of questions for relevant detailed information. For example questions on health, loss, failure and regrets are under the category of "challenges".

In order to achieve my research purpose, I tailored this framework of the interview to suit the research questions and the characteristics of EFL research. The interview protocol I used in the research consisted of five major parts (See Appendix 4 Interview Questions). The first focuses on an overall summary of participants' learning experience. Participants are asked to think of their learning experience as one

story, divide it into a few chapters, name each of them, and give an outline of contents of each chapter. The second part concerns detailed description of particular scenes or moments that stand out in their past learning experience as the high points, the low points and the turning points. Details of each scene include where they were, who was involved, what they did, and what they were thinking and feeling. The third part of the interview is about how they see and imagine the future in terms of EFL learning. The next section concerns their challenges, losses and struggles in EFL learning and how these challenges influenced their learning. In the final part of the interview, participants are encouraged to think reflectively about the major themes of their experience, and their thoughts and feelings during the interview. This interview instrument allowed me a chance to listen to stories by twelve students originally from the countryside, obtaining a vantage point to see their challenges across learning experience, their perspectives on EFL learning and their understandings of the social context.

3.4 Analysis of Life Stories

As discussed in 3.2.2 Life Story in Poststructural Research, poststructural studies frame and analyze life stories through a narrative approach that focuses on the narrative organization of experiences and events as told in the participants' stories. Drawing on the narrative approach to analyzing rural students' stories of EFL learning, I intended to examine the narrative organization of rural students' EFL learning

experiences, or how the rural students discursively construct the context of EFL education through their narratives of learning events. I will illustrate next how I processed the data from life story interviews with the narrative approach step by step.

I applied the three-step narrative approach as described by Miller (2011) to analyze the life stories collected in my research. The first level is to construct the life story of EFL learning. While reading the transcript of life story interview, I collected factual details and placed them in the order of time and space as told by the storyteller. I clarified and mapped out the significant moments and events chronologically in each participant's EFL learning, for example, the time and the place the participant started his or her formal EFL classes, the first EFL class, the challenge in completing homework and passing exams, the efforts made to overcome the challenge, the outcome of efforts, changes of places of education in sequence, the planning for the future and so on. At the second stage, I drew on a thematic field analysis approach to the assemblage of factual details. I focused on what themes rural students presented regarding challenges in EFL learning and how they contextualized those themes. In order to discover the themes of events and experiences, I focused on the description of factual information in storytelling. To understand how the event was contextualized, I concentrated on in what manner or structure he or she presented the event or sequence of events. More importantly, I attended to the participant's comments and reflection on the event to discover what argumentation he or she attempted to claim. For example, a participant, Yu, gave an account of his challenging experience of "being unable to join

the group discussion”. He discursively contextualized this event by the narration of his EFL class in junior high school where the oral class activities admitted the majority of students who had the knowledge of Olympic Games and Hollywood movies. Yu remarked that it was the discussion topic that prevented him from joining the discussion and this made him self-abased. At the third level, I synthesized the results of thematic field analysis to reconstruct the participants’ attitudes toward EFL learning and perceptions of EFL education. For example, the participants’ description and narration of learning frustration and helplessness suggested their low expectations of rewards of EFL learning.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

This research, on a general level, is made for the purpose of promoting equity in EFL education in China. Students from rural China are expected to benefit from the findings of the study in their EFL learning. The individual participants in this study would have a chance to understand themselves better in preparation for the future through recalling, interpreting and reflecting on their own experiences with English learning. Storytelling in the study also provides an opportunity for participants to express their opinions and make their voices heard. In this sense, participation in the research can be empowering and emancipatory for the rural student participants. On the other hand, I made my best effort to deal with a series of ethical concerns to make sure that minimal risks were posed to participants during the research process.

One of the concerns is to ensure every participant's knowledge about their right to withdraw from the research at any time and without any negative consequences. At the pre-interview stage, I gave oral explanations to potential participants on the phone or in face to face conversations, highlighting their right to withdraw. At the interview stage, I explained and restated to the participants their right to withdraw, showing them the relevant part in the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix 3) before their signing. Even after the interview, the participants were reminded that their interview data would be destroyed and excluded from the research if they withdrew. Another concern is about protection of participants' privacy and confidentiality. In addition to the usual practice of removing direct and indirect identifiers such as participants' names and date of birth, I kept the degree of identifiability low by using only a limited number of indirect identifiers that were necessary when describing the participants and reporting the results, such as the relevant village, town and city names and particular school name. The data in paper forms will be stored in a locked cabinet not accessible to anyone outside the study. Data in digital forms will be encrypted and password protected. I am the only person having access to the identifying information.

3.6 Roles of the Researcher

Listening to students' stories about their English learning was a fresh experience of emotions. Sometimes I took the role of the rural student, feeling what it

was like to be in a specific situation for a short time. I felt regretful at the circumstance that brought rural students into a competition for limited chances of a higher level of education. I was angry at what I perceived to be verbal abuse of rural students from their classmates. I was happy about the support rural students had from their families. My role of researcher consists of three aspects.

First of all, I am the research designer. My research interest, my agenda of research and my purpose of research underlie this study. Through my more than ten years of EFL teaching in China, I did not understand how things were for students from rural areas. The study project was designed in a particular way to gain a better understanding of the problem. The findings from this study would provide what I wanted to know. This is the direction in which the research is driven.

Secondly, I took several roles in the process of life story interview. I was a collaborator, working together with the participants to construct their stories in ways that they liked. I did not control the story and the way of storytelling, but helped and directed the teller to develop a more fully told story with emotions, feelings and reflections, instead of listing facts and events. I illustrated my purpose of research to the interviewees before the interview in order for them to understand the interview as a collaboration rather than a Q and A session. Additionally, I was a learner from the students' stories. As Atkinson (1998) argues, the meaning in the story of another's life derives from the meaning we carry within us. To arrive at this, I needed to be open to learning from my interviewees, rural students, and contrast their experience with my

own. “The person receiving another’s life story is the student” (Atkinson, 1998, p.72)

Another important role I took in the research was in the process of analysis and interpretation of the stories. I was the one who connected the rural students’ subjective perspectives to the world outside their stories. I took Atkinson’s (1998) view that researchers should “not judge, but make connections” (p.69). I kept reflecting on my own practices throughout the analysis process, guarding against limiting and stereotyping the storyteller in any way.

3.7 Summary

This chapter is a description of the methodology applied to this project. I framed this research within a paradigm of poststructuralism which allowed me to question the privilege of the authoritative knowledge in the EFL education in China. A life story research was designed, valuing the role of students’ stories of EFL learning in disrupting the privilege of established standards and practices in EFL education. This chapter also detailed procedures of the research—recruiting and identifying participants, collecting stories by life story interviews, and processing and analyzing the stories. I concluded the chapter with the ethical considerations and the critical reflections on my role in the research. The next chapter, Chapter 4, will report the major findings based on the stories of EFL learning told by the participants.

Chapter 4 Findings

This chapter presents the major findings of the study based on the stories of EFL learning told by the twelve rural students who participated in the research. The results of the study are reported in two major sections. The first one is participants' overall summaries of their experiences with EFL learning over their years of formal education. The second part reports their particular challenges and aspirations. This chapter is concluded by a brief summary of the results.

4.1 Summaries of EFL Learning Stories

This section reports how the twelve rural postsecondary students summarized and reflected on their own stories about EFL learning. As detailed in 3.3.3 Life Story Interview in the previous chapter, a part of the life story interview concerns participants' own summaries of their learning experiences (See Appendix 4 Interview Questions). Apart from telling the story about their EFL learning, the participants divided their experience into a few book chapters, outlined contents of the chapters and named them respectively. In this section, I demonstrate how the participants divided their stories of EFL learning into chapters, what book titles and chapter themes they chose for their stories, and what comments they made on their experiences. These findings provide an overview of the participants' experiences with

EFL learning and attitudes towards the experiences. Most of the participants divided their experiences based on a chronological order, though their book titles, chapter themes and reflections went in a wide range.

4.1.1 Zhi: A Normal Path

As the eldest child of her family, Zhi was proud of being the first student from her home village who had been accepted by the first-tier university. In her home village, only few students could achieve enough Gaokao scores to be admitted to higher education.

“We don’t have many university students in my village. I would be the only first-tier university student there. Others went to the third tier at best. The tuition fee for the third tier is too high, so they went to colleges. It is quite common. Our place is relatively underdeveloped. Other places have many university students.”

Zhi identified herself from the students from her home village. Firstly, she was among the few who were able to go to university. Secondly, it was a first-tier university that she was admitted to which required a high entry score in Gaokao and charged low tuition fee. However, Zhi did not consider it a self-achievement, but a gratification of her parents.

“Maybe my parents are gratified, because their child is admitted to the university. I myself don’t have much feeling about it. It is nothing unusual. It is a normal path.”

Zhi divided her “normal path” into three parts— “not understand”, “understand” and “start to study”. She held a consistent interest in English learning since she started to learn it in junior high school. She said, “though I am not a master, I am especially interested in this language, and especially like it. I feel good about it”. Zhi attributed the development of her interest in English to the formal education she had received from primary school to university.

“The life path is always going through the primary school, the junior high and the senior high in order. A thought imposed on me early was studying hard in order to attend a better senior high school. I felt I didn’t take any pains to enter the senior high school. Thinking about going to a better university, I made it to the university in the end. Maybe this process makes it possible for me to learn English. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have such an opportunity to learn it.”

Zhi thought she was supposed to walk through a path starting from the primary school and finishing at the senior high school. Unlike many other rural students, Zhi

completed this path without much pain and then set a higher goal—going to a better university. She achieved her goal and became a first-tier university student, extending her life path to higher education. Thanks to this normal life path, Zhi had the chance to develop her interest in learning English.

4.1.2 Huo: Curiosity to Complexity

Unlike most of the other participants in the research who went to rural primary school, Huo took his elementary education in the provincial capital city. He was taken to the city at the age of two when his parents left the home village and worked in the city as migrant workers. When he completed his primary school, Huo was sent back to the closest town to his home village for secondary education and stayed there for six years. After achieving a qualifying Gaokao score, Huo was admitted to a university in the city and reunited with his family.

Huo divided his experience with EFL learning into four chapters. The first chapter was named “curiosity-arousing English”. It was about his early contact with English speakers and English sound in a research institute where his parents worked as gardeners when he was around five years old. The second chapter was “simple English”. Huo referred to his learning at primary school in the city. “Difficult English” was the title for the next chapter about his hardships in EFL learning in junior and senior high school. The last chapter was “complex English”. He found that the root of the difficulties in EFL learning was the complex grammatical structure of English.

Huo's division of his learning experiences was arranged according to the increasing difficulty of English study from primary school to university. His view of English evolved from "curiosity-arousing" to "simple", to "difficult" and to "complex". From Huo's perspective, English learning was an escalation of difficulty and complexity.

Reflecting on his experience with EFL learning, Huo said, "I think academic performance depends on you yourself. It is not realistic to count on others." Huo regarded independent study as a way of achieving a good score in English tests, implying that he did not have access to any support in EFL learning.

4.1.3 Yu: Struggle for Assimilation

Yu did not start his English learning until he went to junior high school in the town closest to his home village. He found he was among the few students who hadn't learned any English in elementary education. Yu worked very hard and then was accepted by the top senior high school in the prefecture (an administrative subdivision to province) in a small city. After completing secondary education, he was enrolled in a university in the provincial capital city, Kunming.

Yu story of EFL learning was divided into four chapters in time order-- "primary school", "junior high school", "senior high school" and "university". Yu's introduction to contents of the chapters was brief and dramatic.

“In my primary school, I was excellent, I regarded myself as excellent. Then in junior high school, they were doing so well. I felt I suddenly fell into a bottomless abyss. I felt very self-abased in English learning. Under teachers’ and parents’ encouragement, I gradually caught up to them. I could assimilate myself into the class group in senior high school. Assimilation is not a problem now in the university.”

Yu’s story of EFL learning was full of ups and downs. He started from feeling good, then fell into an abyss, struggled to assimilate himself into the class, and ended up with happiness. The turning point was at the time of his senior high school when he could assimilate himself into the class. Yu’s overall summary of his experience indicated how he made his consistent effort to be integrated into the class group.

“It is self-encouragement. Having struggled internally with myself, I encourage myself not to give up. It is a process of self-encouragement. To overcome every challenge, I need to fight and persuade myself to work hard. Hard work pays off. There is always such a period of time for me to adjust myself. It is impossible for me to be able to walk side by side with others on the same road.”

In order to “walk side by side with others”, Yu experienced several internal struggles. Self-persuading and self-encouraging became his ways to overcome challenges during

his years of English learning.

4.1.4 Chong: Starting with Disgust

Chong's home was located in an isolated village in a mountain where there were not any roads to the outside until a couple of years earlier. English remained Chong's study problem from the beginning of his EFL learning in junior high school. Since his first English lesson, Chong had failed almost all English tests and exams in his junior and senior high school. Fortunately, this situation was changed one year before Gaokao. Though he was studying in the university, Chong still struggled with the course of College English.

Chong divided his book of EFL learning story into three chapters, titling them with "being disgusted", "enjoying a little" and "being degenerate a little" respectively. The first chapter was the period from Grade One in junior high to Grade Two in senior high school when he had strong resistance to EFL learning. The next chapter was on his shifting of attitude to "enjoying a little" in his Grade Three of senior high school. Having received learning tips from the teacher, Chong started to achieve passing scores in English tests and be praised by the teacher in class. The last chapter of the story was his learning experience at the university--"being degenerate a little."

"Now I am 'degenerate'. It means I myself don't work hard. I only spend some time in class listening to the teacher's lectures, but do nothing after class. I am

planning to pass the CET-4 first.”

Chong started learning English with a sense of “disgust”, quite different from most of the rest of participants whose first contact with English was curious. This negative feeling occupied most of his experiences with EFL learning. The short period before Gaokao was dramatic for Chong because he was able to pass the exam and receive the teacher’s praise. Chong then succeeded in going to university. He seemed to hold a feeling of moral guilt for not working hard enough at English while he wished could study as hard as he did in senior high school. When requested for a theme of his EFL learning experience, Chong said,

“As I said before, it was the conception of English learning, the initial thought about English when you first started learning it. If the first thought is correct, or the attitude is correct, you will save many twists and turns on the path. The enlightenment at the beginning is very important”

Chong made an analysis of his frustration in English learning. He regretted that the first thought he learned about English was wrong. That was the root of his confrontation with English and his long-lasting problem in English study. The twists and turns on his path of English learning could have been saved if the initial conception of English was not “disgust”.

4.1.5 Bei: Why so Difficult?

Bei came from a rural village about 30 minutes bus ride from the town. His first English class was in Grade Three at a rural primary school, a bit earlier than many other participants. Bei summarized his ten years of EFL learning history in a sentence.

“From the primary school to senior high, we learn English for the purpose of exams, never learning how to use it to communicate with people.”

Bei said his learning experience was not depressing or disappointing, but boring and tedious. Bei divided his book of experience with EFL learning into five chapters. Among them were “first contact”, “encountering difficulties”, “turning point”, “after the turning point” and “conclusion”. “First contact” was his vague memory of his learning at primary school. He remembered that the subject of English was not important then only accounting for ten points. His teacher transferred to English teaching from other subjects after a short time of training. In the second chapter, he underwent difficulties in passing English exams in junior high school. The section of “turning point” referred to Bei’s last year in junior high school when a middle-aged teacher came to teach them. Bei’s test score gradually increased to the passing level. His progress in English study contributed to his admission to a senior high school in

the prefecture capital city. Bei's study problem in the subject of English did not disappear in senior high school. His story was concluded with his success in being admitted to university after three years of hard work. However, due to his lower score of English in Gaokao, he did not meet the entry score of his ideal university and was left with regret.

Scores and exams were frequently mentioned in Bei's narrative of his experience. He was confused about the purpose of learning such a difficult language, and the reasons why English was so difficult.

“My parents told me to learn English well. They heard about it from others. They emphasized hard work, but didn't say why...I can sit side by side with others in the subjects of Physics and Mathematics, but not in English by 20 or 30 points lower than them...Our senior school teacher said, ‘no one is unable to learn English. Those who are not able to are lazy people.’”

Bei could not obtain from his parents the explanation for purpose of learning English. His English teacher, though offering an answer to why some students' test scores were low, was not convincing. Bei became even more confused about the teacher's view that low scores resulted from laziness. Until the day he told his story of EFL learning, Bei had not obtained convincing answers to his puzzles about purpose of EFL learning and difficulty in learning it.

4.1.6 Hong: Fun Fading

Hong finished his elementary education in his home village and his secondary education in a town. He still remembered the details of his first English lesson at primary school, for example, English songs, the teacher's jokes and classmates' laughing. However, his experience with EFL learning in junior high school was not as pleasant as in primary school. Hong's frustrating experience started from his failing in the first English test in secondary school. Although he went through many frustrations in English learning in senior high school, Hong said his academic record of English had been fine particularly among boy students.

Hong's book of EFL learning experiences was in three chapters. His selection of titles for the chapters was "opening and beginning", "study and challenge" and "future". The beginning chapter was about the years of EFL learning at primary school, while the last chapter was about his uncertainty about the future. Hong regarded the second chapter as the major part of his learning experience in which his EFL study faced various challenges in secondary school. Hong described his experience as a combination of pains and happiness.

"Sometimes I really fear studying English. The learning at primary school was fun because the teacher didn't control the class strictly. I had little fun in senior high school study, because there were few chances for us to speak. I think

English itself is a language and should be learned by speaking it...but there were no chances to speak.”

Hong still cherished the pleasant memory of his English study at primary school. In secondary education, English study continued on while joy of learning faded. Hong regarded his years in senior high school as the turning point. He withstood many hardships to learn English, went through Gaokao and became a university student. Hong was uncertain how his English study would proceed in the future. However, he was sure that his problems in learning English would not disappear

4.1.7 Mang: Breaking Through the Limits

Mang’s home village was located next to a small city. She finished her primary school in the home village and entered a junior high school in the city. After that she was admitted to the top senior high school in the prefecture and then to a university in Kunming. Mang did not begin her English study until her junior high school. She presented her positive attitude towards learning English and foreign languages.

“English is important to everyone because it is a window to the world. A sentence always stays in my brain: One language is the window to one world...I might read it from a book or hear it from somebody. I forgot. Now I am learning the language of Lao. I read many books written by Sanmao [a Taiwanese writer

and translator well know for her travel writing]. She can speak Spanish and she knows a lot about the outside world.”

Mang seemed to hold a strong interest in the outside world. She considered foreign language learning a way to know about the outside world. Her reference to Sanmao, her favourite writer, was an example of her philosophy of life. Sanmao, a speaker of many foreign languages and a traveller to the Sahara desert, presented Mang an exotic and romantic world of the outside. She also expressed her enjoyment in learning Lao and appreciation of the Laotian culture characteristic of people’s contentment with simple and virtuous lives.

Mang designed her five-chapter book of EFL learning as a drama with a happy ending. The first chapter was “confusion”, referring to her beginning experience with EFL learning full of her questions about English. The title of the second chapter was “walking out of confusion”, referring to her time from the second year in junior high school to her entering senior high school. She described that “it was like, the dark cloud dispersed, the sky cleared up and the sun emerged”. She named the third chapter “adapting to life at senior high school”, referring to her new experience of study in a school for the local elite students. In the fourth chapter “hard fighting”, Mang related to her memories of the last two years at senior high school when she made preparation for Gaokao. The last chapter was her study at college, “dream of flying”. She emphasized her contentment in her present state at university.

“I am growing up in happiness. I feel I am living a good and rich life. I have never had a boring or empty time since my first day at the university.”

Mang experienced an encouraging journey from “confusion” to “dream of flying”. She was content in the present and optimistic about her future. However, the theme of Mang’s story of EFL learning was “consistently breaking through the limits”.

“Keep breaking through the limits. You will have various experiences. And every piece of them is worthwhile. I experienced a lot of confusions, efforts and struggles. Every piece of them is valuable and indispensable. After experiencing one piece, I feel I get more mature than before”

Mang viewed her learning experience as an inspiring story in which she overcame and transcended many limits and then achieved joy of success. She held high expectations of her own future of foreign language learning.

4.1.8 Wan and Duo: Pursuit and Diligence

Identified from the rest of the participants, Wan and Duo hardly mentioned their frustrations and struggles in their summaries of EFL learning experiences. Instead, they emphasized their aspirations to experience the outside world and the role

of EFL learning in realizing their dreams.

Wan divided his EFL learning experience into four chapters. The first was “getting to know”, which was about his study of English at primary school. The second was his junior high school study, with the title of “naivety”. He said he naively thought he was among the best English learners in his class. The title of the third chapter was “pursuit”, which referred to his consistent efforts for accessing postsecondary education. Wan took Gaokao a second time after his failure in the previous year. He spent four years in senior high school and was then admitted to university due to his more diligent study in the fourth year. The last chapter was about his EFL learning at university—“no directions and directions”. Wan explained why he selected this title for his study at college.

By “‘no directions’, I mean curriculum contents of the English major covers a wide range of knowledge, not limited to a specific discipline. If I have a particular interest in something, I can always find the relevant knowledge from the courses available. ‘Direction’ means I can always find a direction to head to. By comparison, I find the wide gap between this place [Kunming] and other places like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.”

Wan showed his passion for studying in the department of English. On the one hand, he thought that the EFL curriculum provided him opportunity to learn knowledge

across various disciplines by reading in English. On the other hand, Wan encouraged himself to improve by making efforts to catch up with his peers in the developed cities. The “gap” provided Wan with motivation and direction to pursue a better self. He said that the U.S. was the country in which he most wanted to travel and live. Wan declared the theme of his learning EFL experience “do not forget what you want”.

“If you can’t calm down, you will forget what you want to do, and forget your distance from others ahead of you. I am forgetful, but I like pondering. If you calm down and ponder, you will know how far behind you are from others.”

Wan viewed his experiences with EFL learning as a process of discovering gaps. His consistent efforts contributed to his ambition to be as prominent and excellent as those ahead of him. Like a marathon athlete, Wan was sensitive to his location in running and wanted to become one of front-runners. Keeping the “gap” or “distance” in mind made it possible for him to go through his hard time in senior high school and to dream of going to the U.S. in the future.

Similar to Wan, Duo set her goal of going to the outside world. Duo’s parents ran a pig farm. They had encouraged Duo to learn English well since her childhood. Duo said that for this reason, she was good at the study of English. She did not give a clear-cut division of her learning experience, but labeled her experience as “hardship” and “diligence”.

“It is about hardship and diligence. I don’t like reading inspirational stories. My parents’ experiences are inspirational enough...My experience exemplifies that hardship and diligence paid off with good returns too. I work very hard after class. They don’t see it. I trimmed the lamp to read at night, for example. My special thanks to my parents.”

Duo’s belief in returns of hardships and diligence was inherited from her parents whose experiences were the more inspirational than other stories. Duo dreamed of going to the outside world and other countries though she did not mention a specific place.

“There are more opportunities and space outside. And I can earn more money. However, if I stay in our small place, what I can do is only to become a teacher. Nothing else. The routine life of going to work, coming back home, getting married and giving birth to a child is too boring. I especially want to go outside, and have a look at other countries.”

Duo refused to live a routine life and dreamed of experiencing other places in the future. She believed that this dream could come true one day as returns of her diligence.

4.1.9 Juan, Lei and Ping: Interest

Interest was found to be an important theme shared by Juan, Lei and Ping in their summarizing of EFL learning experiences.

Juan did not start her English class until Grade Five in primary school. From then on, her knowledge of English became broader and deeper. Juan's book of eight years' learning experience was divided into four chapters according to the increasing depth of her knowledge of English. She named the first chapter "knowing by the oral". Her initial knowledge of English was mostly obtained through learning to pronounce and speak in primary school. The second chapter was on her study in junior high school when "formal learning" started. By "formal learning", Juan said they began to study a linguistic system from phonetics. Juan's senior high school was the third chapter, "learning by cultural differences". She viewed this stage of learning as exploring English deeper by comparing cultures of China and the Western countries and knowing about differences between their views and perspectives. The final chapter was her study in university by which her knowledge about cultural differences shifted from "what it is" to "why it is". Juan was interest in the knowledge learned in university about the origin and root for cultural differences. She was more interested in why ways of thinking differentiated from one culture to another.

Juan's experiences of English learning constituted her exploration journey of the language and culture. Unexpectedly Juan named themes of her experiences

“score” and “interest”. “Score” was hardly mentioned in her previous chapters, but emerged as one major theme of her summary of EFL learning.

“Interest and score, and more of the score...Interest, in fact, is generated from the process of taking exams. Since the course is required at school, you have to take the course. Since the teacher assigns homework, you must do it. Within this process, my interest gradually grows, and the fun of learning emerges.”

From Juan’s viewpoint, English was a requirement of school education at the beginning and then developed into an interest during the process of study. Thanks to considerable homework and exams, her interest and enjoyment in EFL learning increased gradually.

Only two participants in the research attended their elementary education in the provincial capital city. Similarly to Huo, Lei was taken to the city by her parents who left the village and work in the city as migrant workers. When she finished her primary school, Lei was sent to the town close to her home village for secondary education. Her major in university was Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language. Lei summarized her EFL learning experience as “very smooth, without many pains nor many ups and downs”. Lei also mentioned interest as the theme of her EFL learning.

“Learning a language is not only about hard work, but also about interest.

Interest is the best teacher. If you like it, you are willing to learn it well and work hard at it...With interest, you are not passive, but active.”

Although she admitted diligence was important, Lei emphasized the role of interest in learning a language. Lei said she preferred going to the outside world in the future. Her ideal job was to teach Chinese in another country, though, she said, it was very difficult to realize this dream. However, she located a more realistic dream in the city living with her parents who she emphasized had decided to buy a house in the city.

Ping’s division of learning experiences was based on her knowledge of English. Four stages were “starting from primary school”, “a little understanding at junior high school”, “a better understanding at senior high school” and “digging in depth at university”. Ping said the theme of her story was “shifting of attitudes”. Her attitude toward English fluctuated during her years of EFL learning.

“When I like it, I can learn it well. If I don’t, I don’t even take a look at it. I like English when I was in primary school and the third year in senior high school. In the first two years in senior high school, I really didn’t like it. I had a neutral attitude in junior high school—neither like nor hate it. I learned it only for passing entrance exams to the senior high school. “

Ping’s third year in senior high school was an important period of life time during

which she prepared Gaokao. Within this year, Ping made dramatic progress in study raising her test score in English from 80/150 to above 120/150. Ping attributed this progress to her shifted attitude toward English and her diligence in learning it.

4.2 Experiences and Challenges in EFL Learning

The twelve participants in the research told twelve different stories of EFL learning. Based on these stories, particular topics, emotions and viewpoints of EFL learning were found to be shared and highlighted by the storytellers. In this section, I demonstrate the findings of a series of prominent topics, special events and strong emotions based on the stories told by rural student participants. In reporting the findings, I focus on what happened to the student and how he or she reacted to and reflected on the event. The topics to be presented include elder village students, strange English sound, English exams and the dreams related to English. Three subjects are presented in the end. Isolation, exclusion and humiliation aroused stronger emotions of the storytellers.

4.2.1 Warnings from Elder Village Students: Fear and Resistance:

In the stories of Chong and Zhi, elder village students were mentioned as the people who passed them the initial conception about English before they started their own formal study of English at school. However, both Chong and Zhi regarded the

thought from elder village students as negative to their subsequent study.

Chong, a male student from a remote mountain village, attributed his academic frustration to the resistant attitude towards English that was passed to him by the elder students from the same village. He narrated how he got this conception and how it influenced his own attitude.

“I didn’t start learning with a right attitude. They said it is useless to learn English.

I didn’t possess any favourable opinion about English at the very beginning, so I can’t learn it well now. In my home village, there were some Da Jiejie and Da Gege [elder girls and boys] in Grade Eight and Nine. They told me, ‘English is so difficult, and no use at all’. I hadn’t started the English course at that time. My attitude was like ‘ah, it is so horrible’. I was kind of repugnant to it. ...They said, ‘Why do we Chinese learn a foreign language? What’s the use of learning it?’ If it is of no use, I won’t learn it. I didn’t spend time on it...Then I find it is indeed useless in practice. There are no chances for us to use.”

Chong’s accepted the adverse attitude towards English much earlier than his formal study of English. With such resistance, he then started the English course in junior high school. Through personal experience of EFL learning, Chong tested and confirmed what the elder village students had told him years earlier—English was indeed difficult and useless. However, he expressed his regret that he should have

realized the negative influence of the attitude earlier.

“Frankly speaking, it is much too difficult for us. We start learning English later than other students, and with a negative thought about English. The course becomes more and more difficult and you miss more and more of it. As time goes by, you don’t know where to start to make it up...”

Chong’s experience with elder village students and negative view of English was not unusual. Zhi was a girl from a mountain village and started her first English class in Grade Seven. She received the initial information about English from elder village girls and boys long before she started the formal study of English.

“Before I started learning English, I heard people from the village, those Da Gege and Da Jiejie [elder boys and girls] say, ‘oh, English is too difficult. You cannot understand it at all, and cannot remember English words by any means’. When I heard it, I thought, ‘it might not be true. How can it be so difficult? Why do they ask students to learn such a difficult language?’”

The view of English as a difficult school subject and as a useless foreign language led to Zhi’s fear about her future EFL learning in the upcoming junior high school. She even hesitated to continue with her study after she finished the elementary education.

“Once I sat chatting with my Dad. ‘Everybody says English is very difficult. Must I go to Junior High School?’ Then my Dad said, ‘You must. It is good to have difficulties. The more difficulties you overcome, the more you will learn’”.

Elder village students’ attitude towards English sounded like a warning to Zhi, arousing her fear of future study and aversion towards EFL learning. Bei expressed a strong resistance to English learning. He stated his viewpoint of English without any hesitation.

“For most of us, English is only used in exams. If your expectation is to go back to teach in a junior high school, English won’t be used for sure. It is only for the exams in senior high school and university. If you don’t want to go upwards, such as going back and teach in a junior high school in a town, English is useless”.

Bei considered English useless in practical lives, particularly for those who planned to live a mundane life in a town after graduation from university. He questioned the necessity of this school subject, while suggesting that English teaching should be started as early as kindergarten education.

“Because I think a person’s language system has almost been formed in Grade 3. The person will be repugnant to another language then. If you started to learn the language from a kindergarten age, you will think English is interesting at the beginning.”

Bei emphasized his opinion about the significant impact of the initial attitude on the subsequent study. A positive attitude towards English at the very beginning would lead to success in learning it.

Chong, Zhi and Bei all mentioned that a negative attitude towards English had been implanted in their mind before they started the formal study of it. This preconception that English was extremely difficult and useless was spread and passed down by the elder students in the village, causing emotions of fear and aversion in their childhood. Furthermore, if combined with academic frustration in English exams, this negative view of English remained a long-term impact on their own English learning. Chong and Bei also shared the view that if they had not started from the negative view of English, they would have performed better in EFL learning. An earlier start of English learning, in their view, could have saved them from fear and hostility about English.

4.2.2 Strange Sound: Admiration and Shame

The learning experiences told by the participants showed that sound and

pronunciation were the aspects of English that aroused more curiosity, admiration and embarrassment.

Hong told about his experience of hearing English for the first time in his first English class in Grade Three.

“The teacher played a song from a CD player for us to listen. Oh, What is this? I am so curious. I thought it was the language of some ethnic people because there were many indigenous people living around. Then she introduced and said it was English. That probably was a child’s song. ...[Hong then sang the beginning of the ABC Song.] We had never heard it before. That was the first time. We actually yelled boos.”

When Hong heard the English ABC song, he realized that the song was not in Chinese, but in a language he did not know. Based on his knowledge and life experience, he thought that the song was in an indigenous language. Even after being told by the teacher it was English, the whole class showed their disbelief by “boos”. Although he made a wrong guessing about the song, Hong’s first experience with English left him a pleasant and deep impression.

Huo’s story also highlighted his impression of English sound and pronunciation. His admiration and appreciation of the sound of English were expressed through his detailed description of his experience with native English

speakers.

“They speak so fluently. Some are black people. Sometimes they sound sonorous and forceful, but sometimes smooth and mild. It is impossible for me to reach that level of speaking, maybe until after I enter another realm”.

English speech to Huo’s ears sounded like a melody composed of different music notes. Although he did not understand the speech, Huo enjoyed listening to it. He also viewed pronouncing English as a skill difficult for him to learn. Huo expressed his admiration of his college mates from the department of English who were able to pronounce those melodious sounds.

“I feel the English they speak is so special! The sound and pronunciation are something I can never utter at all...The English major students are so capable. They stress some utterances and lighten up others. Only a few people can do it. I think it is difficult for me to accomplish it in this life of mine.”

While he did not hide his appreciation of English sounds, Huo repeatedly indicated that he could never pronounce those sounds. He regretted his inability to make those rising and falling sounds and admired those who could.

“I don’t know what English is....Those from families with good conditions and good parents, their concept of English is different from ours. They sometimes popped out one or two English sentences, or English words like ‘mother’ ‘father’ ‘apple’. How clever they are! We are far behind them.”

Huo identified himself from the students from a better family background in terms of their concept of English and ability to insert English words into daily conversation.

Listening to English sounds could be enjoyable, while learning to pronounce them was a tough task. Juan said she felt embarrassed to speak English, especially in front of classmates and foreign teachers.

“I was in one of the best senior high schools. I had many schoolmates. Once they spoke English, I felt ashamed with my own pronunciation. I felt gloomy at that time and didn’t want to open my mouth. Everybody felt good about his/her spoken English...when the foreign teacher talked with me, I didn’t know how to respond to him. I didn’t understand him well. I did well in the written part, but not in pronouncing...I felt a bit embarrassed.”

Juan expressed her shame due to her pronunciation problems. She felt ashamed of being unable to pronounce English sounds as well as her schoolmates did. Consequently she was reluctant to open her mouth.

Hong, Huo and Juan all were sensitive to the special way of pronouncing English. The foreign pronunciation and intonation of English aroused their curiosity and then admiration. However, their linguistic repertoire (dialects, Mandarin), local knowledge and life experience did not help much with their understanding and practicing of English sounds and pronunciations. English in their eyes became a language belonging to people who were clever and competent. Pronouncing English caused them embarrassment and shame.

4.2.3 Homework and Exams: Helplessness and Frustration

The participants' stories of EFL learning showed that it was common for them to have the recurring experience of taking pains to study and then being returned by frustration and failure in exams. This repeated process from the effort to failure became a learning cycle that was extremely hard to break. These students were neither able to break the cycle, nor able to escape from it. The state of helplessness often started from junior high and lasted for a long time until they gave up learning.

Chong referred to his painful experience of being unable to finish the English homework when he was in junior high school.

“Looking at the sample test materials, I felt helpless...In the beginning, I was full of confidence in completing them well, but as I went on, I found couldn't. Whom to ask? There is no way for me. The only and best way is, to close the

book, forget it, to escape for a moment. The next day the teacher asked me if I had finished. I chose answers randomly from a, b, c, and d. Once I filled in d casually, and found there were only three choices, no choice of d. I was really distressed, but there were no solutions.”

Compared with homework, results of English tests brought Chong strong frustrations consecutively since junior high school, even though he made several rounds of efforts to change the situation. The only option left for him was to give up.

“In the first test in junior high school, I got 72/120. Since then, I had never got a pass till Grade 3 in Senior High...For a period of time in my Junior High, I wanted to study English. But after a while of hard work, no differences were made. My heart was so disappointed. I made efforts but there were no effects.

Chong’s feeling of helplessness accelerated to a high point when the Provincial Entrance Exams to Senior High School was approaching.

“I really felt helpless at the moment of taking entrance exams to the senior high school. I wanted to enter a better school in the city, but my score in English couldn’t improve.”

Chong felt helpless and anxious because he wanted to achieve a higher score to be admitted to a better senior high school. Education provided by a better senior high school was generally viewed as a high chance for securing postsecondary education in the future. Chong's junior high school life was full of academic failures in homework and exams and his anxiety about failing to enter a good senior high school. Giving up seemed an easier option for him to make under great pressure.

Eventually, I found learning a language is not one-day, two-day work...I didn't see the results after a while and then gave up...My family couldn't help either. I was in an environment where most students didn't want to learn English. I could only follow the majority and give up trying."

It can be seen from Chong's words above that he decided to give up making consistent efforts partly because he was disappointed with his fruitless learning and lack of family support. Another important reason was that giving up learning provided him an opportunity to opt out of helpless struggle and to integrate into the majority of class. Chong successfully escaped the feeling of helplessness and anxiety after he became one of those students who withdrew from the EFL learning. However, he had been annoyed by a puzzle in learning English--why his best efforts to learn and his teacher's suggestions about the learning strategy did not make any difference to his exam scores.

“The teacher asked us to practise writing short English essays. I put words together to make up the sentence. He encouraged me at the moment when he read my English essay, but the score in the exam was very low. I was very upset... Memorizing English words, I felt I couldn't by any means. The teacher just asked us to remember English words after class.”

Bei shared a similar experience with Chong and expressed his distress that hard work did not pay off in English learning as much as in other school subjects.

“Sometimes I felt good about my performance in the English exam. But it turned out that the average score was above 100/150, and mine was only around 80/150 or 90/150. It was very frustrating. I did well in all other subjects. I followed the way that the teacher told us to remember English words, but the low score remained. I was a bit extreme at that moment. If only we didn't have English tests!”

When Bei could not figure out the reason why his efforts to learn English went in vain, he wished English tests would have been canceled. However, the reality was English was one of the three most important subjects along with Chinese and Mathematics. Failure in English to some extent would mean failure in school study.

In Hong's experience, English was considered a special school subject that was different from Chinese and Mathematics due to its difficulty to pass the exam. He described his experience as

“Primary school learning was fine. Once I entered junior high, I got a Fail in almost all English tests. I thought it was very difficult. I remember once we took listening questions. I got many of them wrong. I didn't understand them at all. I was really upset. I can look for a way by myself to improve Chinese and Math, but the foreign language, I feel this is not easy to learn. I was very upset.”

The helplessness in English learning haunted Chong, Bei and Hong through their years of formal education, though they earned high school achievements in many other subjects. Among these three participants, Hong was the only one who provided his analysis of the reason for their academic failure in English.

“Boys, I think, cannot be compared to girls in language talent. It is difficult for us boys to memorize English words. Girl students, their ways, seem talented and skillful in memorizing...My first English test score was a fail. I just think boys are like that. The other subjects are fine, but not English. All of us share this view.”

Hong attributed his failure in the exams of English to the lack of innate talent in memorizing. He aligned himself with other boy students who shared the similar frustrating experience, while identifying himself from the girl students with the natural talent of memorizing. By this way, Hong accounted for his persistent efforts and repeated frustration in English learning.

The feeling of helplessness developed with the endless cycle of their effort making and frustration internalizing, shadowing the EFL learning of Chong, Bei and Hong through their years of education. Their shared problem could be resolved neither by teachers' guidance nor by independent study. When they experienced helplessness in completing homework and improving test scores, they were confronted with choosing between persisting and surrendering. It was comprehensible that many students would choose to surrender when they were aware that the results of English learning were out of their control.

4.2.4 Lagging Behind: Regrets

Based on the stories collected from life story interviews in the research, it appeared that most of the rural student participants focused on the academic failure and frustration that they had endured in English learning for years. However, Wan and Duo emphasized their regrets about the gap between themselves and others, their university and elite universities, and their host city and the developed cities.

Wan held strong regret that he was not admitted to the department of Sports

English in a university in Shanghai. This regret did not fade even after he attended the university in Kunming. Instead his regret was strengthened after several visits to Shanghai. Wan gave a detailed description of his impression of Shanghai.

“It is hard to relieve this regret. I traveled to Shanghai many times. When I was walking on the street, I saw street vendors on roller skate selling goods to foreigners and speaking fluent English. The waiters/waitresses ... can speak fluent English. The high school students’ English was fluent too. I feel the gap between cities is very very huge. The solution is to ring us alarm by telling us how other universities do...Those first-tier and reputable universities are over there. Being content with the current state doesn’t help in our study. Feeling good about ourselves doesn’t help either.”

Wan seemed to admire the lives of the vendors, waiters/waitresses and high school students in Shanghai because they could speak fluent English. From Wan’s perspective, fluent English speaking became a symbol of citizens living in Shanghai. Shanghai was depicted as a modern and international city where there were fluent EFL speakers, foreigners and foreign business. It was a great regret for Wan that he could not make his dream of living in such a city come true. Though he could not live in Shanghai, Wan wanted to keep the pace with the fluent English speakers there. He was eager to be informed of elite students, reputable universities and megacities so that he

could keep the same pace.

Duo was regretful about lagging behind her former classmate who was studying in an elite university in Beijing.

“I have a senior high school classmate. She is a very diligent student. Now she is in Beijing University of Foreign Languages. Her posts on the social network are mostly that their dorm mates read English books till midnight, then get up at 5:30 in the morning and staring at the computer screen. Wow, our dorm mates can never do that. They watch TV series and play games on cell phones. We can never compete with the students of that university in Beijing.”

By classifying and comparing two types of students, Duo showed great admiration to her peers studying in the high-ranking university in Beijing. Through the online posts, she got information on how her former classmates studied English in Beijing. She used these posts to generalize that all students studying in that university in Beijing were diligent in learning English. Looking to her own dorm mates, Duo felt regretful about the gap in diligence between her dormitory mates and her peers in the university in Beijing.

The feeling of lagging behind was prominent in the stories of Wan and Duo. Both of them showed a “sense of crisis” for their current state of study and wanted to catch up with those who were considered ahead of them in Shanghai or Beijing. Wan

compared the reading ability between the English learners in China and the students in America:

“We haven’t read many original English books. This is a big question in learning English. When I was a freshman, the foreign teacher asked us to read some books. He said those were for the students in Grade One and Two in America. He said we hadn’t read them before and let us read. I feel if we don’t develop the habit of English reading in junior and senior high school, we will lag behind by ten years. Now we read the books that American primary students read. They are so slim books.”

In Wan’s story, his foreign teacher gave an assignment of book reading to the class. However, those books were designed for the American kids at the age of six or seven. As an eighteen-year-old freshman, Wan viewed this assignment as an opportunity to make up for the reading of original English books, though those books were for American children to read. Wan expressed a strong desire to read more English books based on his awareness of the ten-year gap between him and his American peers. Meanwhile he was extremely regretful about this awareness: Chinese students did not read as many English books as American students.

Both Wan and Duo’s stories expressed their regrets about their lagging-behind status. They aspired to catch up with their peers in Beijing and

Shanghai who were fluent English speakers and diligent English learners. Wan showed an international vision of his own status in relation to American students who read more English books. Coming from rural areas, both of them cast their eyes to economically developed cities or countries, which made them regretful of their current state of lagging behind.

Moreover, Duo had her greatest regret on the personality difference between her and her senior schoolmate who was good at making friends with foreigners.

“The regret is my timidity. I can’t make friends with foreigners. Once I attended a presentation for freshmen, a Xuejie [a female senior schoolmate] told us many of her experiences of how to communicate with foreigners. She is very active and likes making friends with foreigners. But for me, I can’t do it. This is my greatest regret. I feel I am active and outgoing enough with my friends...One problem is there is no access or event; another is I am not open-minded enough.”

Duo wanted to make friends with foreigners. She showed great interest in the senior schoolmate’s rich experiences, making friends with foreigners and wanted to learn from them. In Duo’s eyes, only those who were extremely active and open-minded were able to approach and make friends with foreigners. She regretted not having many opportunities to know foreigners and not having a more open mind. Duo

emphasized that her personality prevented her from accessing and making friends with foreigners.

Unlike Duo and Wan who compared their university with elite universities, and their host city to the developed cities, Mang stated her view of the gap between the world of English speakers and the world of Chinese people:

“Life in the world of English is free and easy, not controlled by the stuff around. Everything is directed by spirit, not bound with the surrounding conditions. Chinese people are bound by the stuff around. The spirit is bounded, while in the world of English, it is the spirit that directs conditions, such as environment, family and friends. In the world of English, I can do whatever I want. “

In Mang’s conception of the world of English, people could make free and independent choice without considering people and conditions around. However, it was the opposition in China where family, friends and surroundings had to be taken into consideration to make a decision. The key point in Mang’s comparison was that living in the world of English was better and easier than in realistic China. The gap between these two worlds drove Mang to pursue the outside world.

4.2.5 Dreams: a Compromise with Family Obligation

The participants in the research had different dreams of their future jobs and

residence places. Unexpectedly, the topic of family responsibility was frequently mentioned in relation to their dreams. Some participants discussed conflicts between personal dreams and family obligation, whereas others prioritized family obligation over personal dreams.

Majoring in the language of Arabic with English as the second foreign language, Zhi dreamed of being an interpreter in the future. However, she showed a conflicting mind in making a real decision between her dream job and the responsibility for taking care of the family. On the one hand, her parents played a crucial role in her life.

“On my life path, most time is spent with teachers, longer than that with my parents. But my parents have given me what nobody else can. It will accompany me for life. The influence of parents on me about being a good person is especially important.”

Zhi spent most of her time at school with occasional home visits since she went to junior high school. Her time spent with parents was much shorter than with teachers at school. However, the influence of parents would last for her life. On the other hand, Zhi dreamed of being an interpreter who was supposed to work in a foreign country.

“I want to be an interpreter...But if I am an interpreter, I must go abroad. I really

don't want to drift outside; I want to be closer to my family. In this way, if my parents need something or something happens, I need to be here too. It is too conflicting. Now what I can do is to learn Arabic well. If Arabic is not helpful in finding a job, I will pass CET-4 and CET-6 and become a teacher. If they don't work, I will use English to find a job. After four or five years, my parents will be over 40. They are not suitable for doing labor work anymore.”

Zhi listed three alternatives for her future work. It was less likely for her to find the ideal job of an Arabic interpreter due to a deficient market demand. The secondary choice was to be a teacher after she passed two national college English tests. The last one was to find a job related to English. Whatever her job was, Zhi wanted to stay as close as possible to her parents in order to take care of them. She placed her responsibility for her family a priority over the consideration of any future profession.

Mang presented a similar contradictory state and looked for a way to balance her dream and responsibility for her parents. She narrated the moment that she made the decision to have parents around in the future.

“My mum is very soft-hearted. When I was in senior high school, I went back home once a month. The school was a bit far. One time I went home, my mum cried. She missed me so much. After that, I think I would have them around, not let them be far from me. It is not likely for me to do so, even in the future when I

look for a job.”

Mang was determined not to have parents far from her in the future. However, she faced the conflicts between her future workplace and her parents’ residence place.

“I can’t find a job back to my home village due to my major in the Lao language. So now I want to try my best to study well so that I will have more freedom in future. If you don’t work hard, you will be fixed in one position...so just let myself be freer so that I can stay with my parents as long as I can. Even though I can’t stay with them every moment, I will try my best to take care of them. Their lives are not easy. They raise me while they themselves are getting old. I feel sad if I don’t go back in the future. I am full of conflicting thoughts. My job is important too. I need to work very hard now so that I will have more time and more freedom in the future. If I am excellent enough, I won’t be fixed in one job and can’t go anywhere.”

For Mang, having her parents around was as important as her personal dream. The paradox, however, was that she could not even find a job if she stayed with her parents in the home village. It was hard for her to give up either her own dream job or her parents. In order to keep both, she would try her best to study. In her anticipation, her diligence studying at university would be rewarded with work flexibility with more

time and more freedom in the future, which would allow her to stay by the side of her parents when she wanted.

Huo did not struggle too much when his dream conflicted with his parents' expectation.

“If I can find a job here in this city, I am willing to even teach in a primary school. But my family asks me to go back to the town. They say the town is close to home. If I go somewhere very far, I can't look after the family in case of emergency. So my ideal future is, to be as close to them as possible.”

Huo's dream was to be able to work and live in the provincial capital city. However, he changed his mind when knowing about his family's need. From Huo's perspective, the connection of family weighed heavier than his personal dream. Being close to the family was his primary consideration in seeking jobs.

Both Zhi, Mang and Huo were aware of the contradiction of their future work with their responsibility for parents. They were making efforts to compromise their own dreams with their responsibility to look after their parents and family. Other participants, although without such conflicting thoughts, all mention their dreams with respects to their parents and other family members. Parents and family made up an essential part of their dream of the future.

Hong did not expect himself to work in the provincial city due to the competitive

job seeking. He wanted to work in a place closer to the rural home.

“Employment here is very difficult because many graduates from other universities are stronger in their field. I want to work close to home so that it is convenient to look after my family. I am the first son and will be the head of the family in the future. My parents live a hard life. My elder sister is in the third year at university. It is not easy to support two university students.”

Hong felt a strong sense of responsibility for his family as the eldest son and future head of the family (in a traditional rural family, the first son inherits the leadership of the family from the father who shares the largest responsibility for the family). The family was his major consideration in seeking employment. Taking family obligation was his most important future plan.

For Bei and Chong, returning to work in a town close to the home village was a collective decision by the family. Bei's family asked him to study in a university in the same province rather than going to other provinces. His dream was to go back to teach in a junior high school in the town after his graduation. Similarly, Chong wanted to work in a place closer to his family in the village.

In Chong's case, his sister who graduated from the university two years ago told him that a university major related to hydropower would prepare him for a job in the hydropower plant near their village. He followed his sister's advice and applied for

the major. Chong was then rejected by this university because he did not achieve enough entry score in Gaokao. Chong was please to be able to study in a university training future teachers. His personal dream was to work as a school teacher. Chong described his life in the future as:

“I usually like playing sports and enjoying life. I am now studying at the normal university, so that I can work as a teacher in the future and have many students. I really like connecting with students. I will have more spare time. This is my thought.”

No matter what dreams they had, most of the participants wanted to leave the city where they pursued their university degree, and return to the town close to their family. Family and parents were often their primary concern in their consideration of place of residence and work. When contradicting with their family’s expectation, they tried to find a way to strike the balance with their personal dreams. Most of the participants preferred to work in the town after completing university for two major reasons. Firstly, the short geographical distance from the town to the rural village made it convenient for them to look after the family. Secondly, there were job opportunities available in the town that were related to their university majors.

4.2.6 Isolation from the Majority: Loneliness and Self-esteem

The classmate relationship was one of the focal points mentioned by the participants in their experiences with English learning. Mang and Chong both detailed their experiences of being isolated from the majority of the students due to their performance and scores in the subject of English.

When she entered senior high school, Mang found she was in a class where those achieving high scores were popular among students and those with low scores were isolated.

“I had the same feeling as other classmates whose scores were not good...Seeing the classmates whose scores were lower, they directly ignored them.”

In Mang’s class, students were divided into two groups — those who could achieve high scores and those who could not. The high score achievers became the center of the classmates and were surrounded by most of the students. However, if you were neither the high score achievers nor the admirer of them, you were left isolated.

“Once I got into Grade One in senior high school, we had three people in the dorm. I felt we were the same at the beginning. Then there came a mid-term

exam, one of our roommates, who played and lived together with us, got the second rank of the class. I was only ranked 40th. Then many classmates surrounded her and played with her. Finally, I became alone, and we separated.”

Mang did not recognize her difference from the roommate when she started her senior school study, because they were like friends who hung out together and lived in the same room. The situation changed overnight when the rankings of the mid-term exam were announced. The friendship between Mang and her roommate was brought to a halt. Her friend was surrounded by many classmates, while Mang was left alone. This event made a profound impact on Mang’s subsequent attitude towards learning. She then determined to study harder and regarded achieving high scores as a way of restoring self-esteem. She said “from then on, I thought I should study hard. I won’t be belittled by others. I had the faith in studying hard from that moment and then I started to make effort.” The desire of “not being belittled” became Mang’s motivation for the extremely hard work on English learning.

“I remember once I didn’t have any desire to read English when I got home, none at all. But I made all my efforts to force myself. I can remember that moment of forcing myself. I sat in the classroom alone, telling myself ‘you have to finish it within some time. If you can’t, you have to do that...’ I tortured myself too much at that time. Just me myself, I pressed myself to read...I was

extremely diligent in the third year. Every Sunday I was in the classroom. No one was there...Everybody worked hard till 12:10 at night, and then went on to read books back in the dorm till one or two o'clock in the morning. We got up at 6:30 early in the morning and read books. We tried our best.”

Mang made her best efforts to learn English, expecting to be a high score achiever in order not to be despised by her classmates. From Mang's perspective, her lower ranking in the mid-term exam deprived of her friendship and her self-esteem as well. Mang described herself as a lonely, determined and diligent English learner. To regain her self-esteem and self-pride, Mang endured extreme loneliness sitting in the empty classroom on Sundays and struggled with herself to learn English.

Isolation of the majority classmates was also a topic in Chong's story. Interestingly, it was not the same type as in the case of Mang that those unable to achieve high scores would be isolated. In Chong's senior high school class, on the contrary, those who appeared diligent in English learning were isolated.

“The key is the study atmosphere. If most of the others are studying, you study unconsciously. My class was different. If you studied, others would say you were pretending. The diligent students were minority...In my class, everyone was playing, while you were learning. You would be excluded. We didn't compete for who was the best at studying, but for who was the best at playing.

That was a troubled class...there was a diligent student. He didn't get on well with them, because they were resistant to him."

Chong's senior high school class was quite different Mang's in terms of what kind of students were isolated. In Chong's class, those who showed their efforts to study would be isolated. As Chong said, it depended upon what the majority of students did, and the others in the minority group would be isolated. Chong was conscious of the indifferent view of English among the majority students and did not want to sacrifice his future education. He figured out his own way of balancing his relationship with classmates and his study of English.

"I was the kind who both played and studied [he laughed]...If possible, I played with them, but I listened attentively in class. I worked extra hours at home. I worked very hard on my own. When I was in the final year in senior high school, I studied till one or two o'clock early morning. I was very exhausted. I played with them most of the time."

In such a "troubled class", Chong did not want to be isolated from the majority. Neither did he want to fail his study. To achieve both the classmate-ship and academic success, Chong chose to live a double life. He aligned himself with those who isolated the hard-working students in school during the day. After going back home, he

presented another side--studying hard for long hours until the early morning. Living such a double life helped Chong avoid classmate isolation and succeed in attending the university.

4.2.7 Exclusion from the Group Discussion: Self-abasement

Yu told stories about his participation in class activities, especially those that were designed to improve students' English communicative skills. He did not have positive experiences with English class activities when he was in junior high school. Yu first related to his memory of how the teacher taught them to read out English words and how he responded at the beginning of junior high school.

“He taught words this way. In the beginning, he called students to read out the words, and then taught us to read. He usually asked us to follow his reading. There was self-introduction exercise too. He then asked us to introduce ourselves in English. I was very shy at that time and dared not speak up. Many of my classmates did, but I didn't.”

Yu seemed a bit regretful about the failure to take the chance to practise speaking due to his bashfulness. However, when he tried to seize the opportunity to speak in class, a new problem came up to prevent him from opening his mouth.

Yu felt inferior to others when he could not solve the problem of being unable

to participate in the group discussion in class because of his insufficient knowledge on the discussion topic. Yu described what kind of topics were there for them to discuss.

“Learning English would involve something like foreign movies. To us, we hadn’t touched many...I didn’t know many things. For example, movies, some that were referred to in the textbook. Those children from the town could go home and watch them on the computer, right? We didn’t know any. The knowledge from the teacher and class was limited, and that was all we absorbed. It was impossible to show every movie in class.”

Topics about foreign movies became a barrier that prevented Yu from participating in discussing with other classmates. Only those who had watched movies were able to join in the discussion, such as the teacher and Yu’s classmates from the town. Unlike his classmates from the town who could go home, watch TV and use the computer every day, Yu lived at school without access to those electronic facilities. Yu took an example to show how the discussion topic was chosen.

“A topic was to introduce some athletes from western countries. The teacher, based on the textbook, said they were the fastest runners in the world, or the fastest swimmers in the world. Those classmates discussed their views after they watched the games at home. We didn’t have a way. Our knowledge was limited

to what was in the textbook. There was no way for us to access anything else. We might know about Chinese athletes, but not the foreign ones.”

It can be seen from Yu’s story that the discussion topic in the English class was related to the content of English lessons in the textbook. These text-related subjects like western movies and athletes were used by the teacher to expand students’ knowledge base and practice their language skills through their contribution to the group discussion. For Yu, however, due to insufficient knowledge about foreign culture and lack of access to it, these culturally strange topics excluded him from the discussion group.

Yu talked about how those culturally strange topics led to his feeling of exclusion from the group and inferiority to other classmates.

“We only had little information. The teacher and classmates were discussing this stuff, some information out of the textbook. We indeed didn’t know about it at all. That was the moment I was very self-abased and depressed. When the moment came, I was in great pain in fact. I was unable to join them and felt being excluded. They were all familiar with the topic they were discussing, but we didn’t have a hint of it.”

Feeling being excluded was not the worst. According to Yu, he generated extreme

feelings about his birth origin when he could not find a way to be involved in the discussion.

“What I could do was to say something that had already been written in the textbook. I am not confident enough to speak if I don’t have the knowledge outside of the textbook. Because everybody can see what is in the textbook. My passion then wears out. I sometimes thought, “Why was I born in the village?” I even had this idea. If I was born in the town, I could speak out confidently. I had various ideas in my heart.”

When his teacher found that Yu appeared passive in the class activity, he talked with Yu privately.

“I had to adjust by myself. I was very self-abased at the beginning stage. Then the teacher detected it and talked to me. He said rural children had some weakness in this part, and then asked me to adjust myself to assimilate into the group. He asked me, ‘do you have some thoughts against other classmates?’ Then, I said, ‘It is not easy, not easy to integrate into the class group, because I know only a little’... The teacher tried his best to place me in the same group with the knowledgeable classmates, but it didn’t help much.”

The teacher was obviously sensitive to Yu's passive behavior in class discussion. However, it appeared to the teacher that Yu, like many other rural students, had problems in assimilating into the class group that was mainly made up of students from the town at the beginning of junior high school. Students from the town possessed more knowledge of western culture required for group discussion, whereas such rural students as Yu did not. From the teacher's perspective, Yu's problem was his lack of the text-related knowledge and could be resolved by working with town students with more knowledge. However, Yu did not think it was an effective way to solve his problem. He attributed this problem to his place to grow up. "It is the issue of the environment where you grew up. My situation cannot be changed in a moment as we wish. What they [non-rural students] have seen, we haven't." It was the place to grow up, the village or the town, that shaped the vision and knowledge. Yu was aware that this issue could not be solved by the teacher's help or his own efforts. Being excluded from the class and misunderstood by the teacher, Yu gradually lost his passion for participating in class activities. He then found resonance with his peers from rural villages.

"Most students were from the town. There were over 50 students in my class, only about 10 of them from the village. I talked about my feeling with them lately, and they had the same feeling. But none of us could figure out a way."

Yu was among the one fifth students who were from the village and had no access to outside-textbook knowledge. He emphasized the significance of such facilities as TV and internet that could provide him access to the knowledge outside of the textbook.

“Because we were in junior high school then, we didn’t have smartphones. We had the flip cover type, but it couldn’t be used for surfing the internet...That time was not like the present, we can receive information instantly...Cell phone use was banned at school...If we wanted to call home, we used the public phone at school.”

Yu considered the cell phone an access to the internet and the knowledge outside of textbooks. More importantly, with the knowledge obtained from the internet, he was allowed to participate in group discussion in EFL classes. However, using cell phones was banned at his junior high school. Yu’s mental state of self-abasement lasted throughout his junior high study.

“This problem wasn’t solved. I had to break through it in other subjects. I heavily depended on rote memory in English and my performance improved. But my mental state didn’t change. I was fine with the grading, but the feeling lasted through the junior high study.”

From Yu's perspective, speaking in the group discussion was a sign of worthiness and pride. Yu felt ashamed of being excluded from the class group due to his lack of access to western and international knowledge outside of the English textbook. This state of self-abasement lasted for three years until he entered senior high school. Yu bought a cell phone then.

Yu changed a lot when he was in senior high school. He bought a cell phone and brought to school. With the cell phone, Yu prepared the class discussion by looking up for the text-related knowledge before class. In the class, he was proud to be able to know more and speak more than the group members. Yu became the centre of the discussion group, enjoying being listened to by others.

“It is quite normal. They know a little, not much, or heard of it. But I explored those materials in depth, and I spoke much more.”

Yu regained his confidence when he was able to participate in the discussion. More importantly, Yu did not feel inferior to his town classmates in accessing the knowledge of foreign culture and people. Owning a cell phone allowed Yu to dispose of his long-lasting self-abasement and reestablish his confidence and passion for EFL learning.

“Now I can walk side by side with others...I am able to learn the knowledge that

others know and I don't know...With the cell phone, our information gap is reduced or disappears. Sometimes I know, but they don't know. It often happens...This stuff, the internet, makes me regain my passion.”

A cell phone indeed was crucial in changing Yu's attitude towards his own worthiness and capability. However, the student also took a high risk of violating student rules. It was banned for students to own and use the cell phone at school.

“I think I had to change. I wanted to assimilate into the group very much. If there is no condition for achieving it, I had to make some breakthrough on my part. I bought one [cell phone].”

Having suffered the feeling of exclusion and self-abasement for three years, Yu held a strong desire to integrate into the class group. Yu broke the school rule and secretly used a cell phone, taking the risk of being caught and punished. Fortunately, Yu was not caught and entered university as he had wished.

4.2.8 Humiliation by Non-Rural Students: Anger

A prominent theme in Huo's story was humiliation. Huo received verbal offence from his classmates whose English test score was higher than his. When Huo was in senior high school in the city, he struggled with remembering words, learning

grammar rules and analyzing sentence structures. Similarly to other participants, Huo felt embarrassed and self-abased when his test score remained lower than other students’.

“Because you are a student, it is not good to lag behind too much. You should have an all-right score anyhow...My desk mate was the best in English in our class. Every time after the test... he sometimes got over 120/150 or 130/150, we got 60 or 70 at most...at that moment, you felt very embarrassed. It feels like you are worthless.”

Huo did not give up learning English in senior high school despite his academic failure and emotional frustration. However his efforts did not pay off. “They were excellent. I should improve myself too. I memorized many words. But it did not solve all problems...I tried my best to reduce my distance from them.” Being aware that his way of study was not effective, Huo then decided to ask his “excellent” classmates for help to improve his study. He was returned with offensive comments in response from one of the classmates.

“Sometimes when I wanted to discuss the questions with them, they would say, ‘how come you don’t understand such a simple question? This is so easy. You don’t have any knowledge base’. You feel like, maybe I am lagging far behind

and cannot keep the pace with them.”

While Huo showed modesty to learn from his classmates, his classmate did not offer help. Instead he asked other classmates not to offer help with insulting and humiliating words. Huo attributed these words to the fact that he was lagging behind. There was a moment when his helplessness, frustration and humiliation accumulated to a certain level. Huo described the moment his tolerance reached its limit.

“If their words were too much, a fight was inevitable. I was very modest and asked the girl student sitting next to me. I was begging, begging her to tell me the answer. Then the boy sitting in front of us, his English level is better, said, ‘No need to teach! No need to teach! This is too damned easy’. That’s the moment my button was pressed. I felt like exploding with all my strength and was about to move my hand and hit him. But then I thought, I am already an adult of 18 years old. There is no need to hit him. Then I suppressed the fire of anger in my heart. I tried to control myself, because he had the qualification to say so and I didn’t have his level. I need to accept the comments like that.”

Being despised by the classmates who were considered more successful in English learning, Huo felt so humiliated that he wanted to return fists. However, when his anger reached its limit, he did not let it out. Instead he showed strong control of his

emotion and behavior. He eventually suppressed his outrage and forced himself to embrace the humiliation by his classmates. On the one hand, Huo persuaded himself that an adult should not resort to violence; on the other hand, He attributed this humiliation to his low level of English proficiency. In this way, Huo accepted the insult and internalized his anger.

4.3 Summary

This chapter demonstrated the major findings of the research problem based on twelve stories of EFL learning told by the participants. The participants summarized their EFL learning experience as a whole in different ways and selected different themes for their stories. Many participants reflected on their experience of struggles, regrets and frustrations in their EFL learning in a positive way. For example, Wan, Duo and Mang viewed EFL learning experience as a journey of pursuing a better self. They kept studying further and breaking through their limits. Juan, Lei, Ping and Zhi attributed their ability to understand cultural differences and diversities to EFL learning. Yu reflected on his experiences as a success of assimilating into his class—“being able to walk side by side with his classmates on the same road”. However, not all the participants took such a positive attitude towards failures and frustrations in EFL learning as the above storytellers. Hong, Bei and Huo regarded their EFL learning as a fun-fading, curiosity-decreasing and difficulty-increasing process. In addition, Chong’s story of EFL learning was started from the disgust of

English and ended with many regrets.

The findings also revealed a series of prominent challenges, frustrations and aspirations that the participants had faced and experienced in EFL learning. Some of the participants referred to the people who were related to their challenges. For example, the elder students who spread their disgust of English around the village, the classmates who allied themselves with the top-scorers and isolated those with lower scores, and the student who despised his classmate's effort to learn English. The participants expressed their emotions of fear, regrets, loneliness and anger in these stories. Other challenges were related to the study of English in and out of class. Speaking English, taking English exams, doing assignments and participating in class activities were found to be the challenging moments when the rural students felt embarrassed, helpless and self-abased. Another type of challenge was associated with participants' expectations about their future lives. Some participants were concerned about their lagging-behind position compared with their urban and Western peers, whereas others expressed their awareness of the conflicts between their ideal lives and family responsibility. Most of these participants, however, had figured out their own ways to deal with potential conflicts or had made a decision to compromise their dreams. Although the participants' stories of EFL learning demonstrated their active participation, consistent efforts and various aspirations, their experiences were typical of frustration in English study, loss of confidence and self-esteem and feelings of embarrassment and self-abasement. In the next chapter, I analyze and interpret these

findings of the study with regard to two concepts “imagined community” and “investment”. I discuss how rural students invest in EFL learning and why they invest in such a way. I also discuss how EFL teaching practices pose challenges to rural students in their EFL learning.

Chapter 5 Discussion

This chapter discusses rural students' learning experiences and their narratives of challenge in EFL learning. I first discuss how rural students perceive investment in EFL learning based on their challenging experiences. Then I discuss rural students' narration of challenges in relation to their imagining of the EFL community. Next I probe deeper the particular perspectives of EFL education discursively narrated within rural students' stories that contextualize their challenges in EFL learning.

5.1 Perception of Investment in EFL Learning

5.1.1 Pessimistic Investors

As discussed in Chapter 2 Literature Review, the value of English as cultural capital is widely accepted and greatly strengthened against the backdrop of a booming market economy (Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Norton, & Gao, 2008; Gao, 2012). According to Norton (2010), language learners increase their cultural capital by way of learning a target language and acquiring more symbolic and material resources. A prevalent belief of the learners in China is that investing in EFL learning can provide a return of more economic and symbolic capital. The participants' stories in this study, however, presented a different attitude towards investing in EFL learning. Rural

students are often pessimistic about the outcome of their investment in EFL learning. From their perspective, EFL learning is a high-risk investment that offers only little reward in both the short and long terms.

Firstly, EFL learning can be a risky investment for rural students in terms of their slim chances for achieving academic success in the subject of English despite their extreme diligence. The participants in the research often reaped from their years of diligent study repeated academic failure in English exams, which was not the case in their study of Math or Chinese. Chong failed in almost all English exams and tests during his seven years of learning experiences from high school to university. Hong had a similar experience. He failed in the first English test in his life and then could not achieve passing grades for three years in junior high school. This was also the case for Bei, who could not pass most of his English tests. In addition, Huo had a poor academic record through his EFL learning history. For the above rural students, years of consistent investment in EFL learning was inevitably rewarded with repeated failures in exams. Accordingly, their passion for investing in EFL learning declined gradually in the early years of learning along with their increasing failures in exams. The extremely low chance of passing in English made these rural students lose interest in participating in the imagined community of educated urban professionals with higher pay and fewer worries. Investing in an unreachable fantasy becomes meaningless. Rural students' recurring failure in English exams in my study can also be found in the studies reviewed in Chapter 2—Hamid's (2009) study of low school

English achievement of rural Bangladeshi students and Li's study (2010) of low-quality learning of elite university students from rural China. Both studies share the finding that rural students' lack of family economic capital and dominant cultural capital lead to their academic failure in English courses.

Secondly, rural students have low expectations of being rewarded for their investment in EFL learning with regard to future opportunities for urban employment. Since the value of English as cultural capital is widely recognized in China's labour market, investing in English learning is generally viewed as a means for university students to access better opportunities for professional careers (Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Norton, & Gao, 2008; Gao, 2012). However, while one participant, Wan, planned to spend his future in the city or in the U.S., the rest of them were willing to work in the town close to their home village. Zhi, Lei and Hong all expressed their aspirations to work in the city based on the nature of those jobs related to their major in a foreign language (Arabic, Lao and English respectively). However, they had low expectations of winning a job in the competitive urban job market. For example, Hong did not think he would be academically strong enough to compete against other university graduates for an urban job. Therefore, the participants often held a pessimistic attitude towards EFL learning. Since the future chance of employment in the city is so slim, the rural students may lose their confidence in the value of English as a tool in employment. Furthermore, most participants prioritized their concerns for their aging parents and family responsibilities over their ideal professions and

workplaces (more details are discussed in 5.1.3.1 Town Dreams in this chapter). It is realistic for rural students to have a pessimistic view about finding an urban job as a reward for EFL learning. Mok and Jiang (2017) claim that with the expansion and marketization of higher education in Asian countries it is more difficult for university graduates to find employment and be promoted in professions. Family background, social networking and cultural capital are all factors in this. With fewer advantages in these respects, rural university students have a lower expectation of their future employment despite their diligent investment in EFL.

The findings of this study show that some learners from rural China are pessimistic about gaining returns on their investment in EFL learning. They often consider EFL learning a high-risk, low-return investment with regard to its slim chance to reap rewards. This attitude towards EFL goes against the dominant view in China that EFL learning can be rewarded by good returns of material and symbolic resources, such as better education, better jobs, higher pay and more opportunities for professional promotions. This dominant view can be found in a series of studies by Norton and Kamal (2003), Gao et al. (2008) and Li and Simpson (2013) as discussed in Chapter 2. This view is rooted in the widely accepted ideology of English as a tool for education and jobs, which is underlying the language policy and teaching practices in a wide range of contexts (Tollefson, 1991). In China, the instrumental value of English is recognized by the foreign language policy, and accepted among EFL learners (Gil & Adamson, 2011; Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Gao, 2012). English

language skills may increase the chances for many students to study in elite schools and universities, to work in international companies and to achieve professional promotions. However, it is not necessarily true for all EFL students in China. As the results of the study show, rural students' investment of long hours and extreme diligence in EFL often leads to limited returns and, indeed, the requirement to learn English can have a highly negative impact as illustrated in the opening story in Chapter 1. Rural students' pessimistic attitudes towards investing in EFL learning suggest that the dominant view of high returns from EFL learning is problematic. The instrumental value of English is exaggerated and the ideology of English as a tool for education and jobs remains dominant in EFL practice in China. Therefore, rural students' pessimistic view regarding returns of EFL learning is associated with the values and ideology of EFL teaching. Driven by this ideology, rural students not only show little confidence in the returns of EFL learning, but also give a low evaluation of their investment in it. I will discuss their feelings of unworthiness about their investment in the next section.

5.1.2 Ashamed Investors

Based on the stories told by the participants, rural students often invest in EFL learning with feelings of loss of self-esteem, embarrassment, or self-abasement. The storytellers associated these feelings to certain cultures and practices in the EFL classroom. I will discuss what cultures and practices are narrated in the stories and

how they prevent rural students from becoming respected and confident investors in EFL learning.

As shown in Chapter 4, Yu felt “very self-abased and depressed” when excluded from group discussion on topics of Western movies and foreign athletes. Due to limited access to the relevant knowledge on Western and international culture, Yu was excluded from the discussion despite his eagerness to participate—to “walk side by side with others on the same road” in Yu’s words. He subordinated himself to his classmates who were able to speak in the class activity with the knowledge required for participation. Yu’s feeling of self-abasement was not only based on his limited access to Western and international cultures as such, but also related to his being excluded from the classroom activity. In Yu’s EFL class, the knowledge required for participating in learning was about foreign movies and athletes. The students without the relevant knowledge were excluded. This exclusion of rural students will be discussed in terms of imagined community in the section of The Imagined Community Excluding Rural Students.

Yu was not the only one who felt self-abased in relation to his investment. Being unable to speak English in front of classmates was an issue for Juan when she entered a senior middle school featuring foreign teachers and student EFL societies. “I felt ashamed of my own pronunciation. I felt gloomy at that time and didn’t want to open my mouth.” Though she was good at writing, Juan felt embarrassed about her English pronunciation learned from a town junior high school. In this middle school,

“everybody felt good about his/her spoken English” except for Juan. Juan said she was good at English writing, but it was not worth boasting about in front of classmates. It was really the ability to speak with native-like pronunciation that was considered the most legitimate skill among classmates. Duo’s story revealed that a certain student model was promoted at school and particular personalities were considered good for learning among students. The model student gave a presentation on how to learn English and make friends with foreigners. The model was active, outgoing and open-minded, so Duo viewed her timid personality as most regrettable in EFL learning.

Unable to achieve a similar score in the EFL exam to their classmates’, rural students often doubt about their self-worth: “It feels like you are worthless”, said Huo when his score was only about half of his desk-mate’s. Although he remembered many words, he could not obtain even a passing grade. Chinese students often hold a strong belief in repetitive practice and memorization (Yang, 1999). As discussed in Chapter 2, repetition, imitation and memorization are effective learning strategies for some EFL learners, but need to be combined with long hours of listening to recordings, watching English dramas and movies and reciting lines (Ding, 2007). Huo’s hard work in remembering English words obviously could not help him with achieving high marks in exams. Jin and Cortazzi (2006) and Shi (2006) argue that Chinese students’ learning practices are shifting from a fixed cultural norm to diverse practices. However, some rural students still face the challenge of learning diverse strategies for EFL.

As a result of low scores and low rankings in EFL exams, rural students can be labeled, isolated or even humiliated. According to Bei's story, his teacher said "no one is unable to learn English; those who are not able to are lazy people". Based on the teacher's standard, Bei was automatically categorized into lazy students due to his very low marks. Mang's story was about how she lost her friend as a result of low ranking in the first English test and how she struggled to regain her self-esteem by high scores. Mang's close friend, after ranking high in the first English test in senior high school, became popular and surrounded by many followers. Mang was left alone due to her low marks. She then endured loneliness and invested extreme diligence in EFL learning, in order not to "be belittled". Mang studied alone in the classroom even on Sunday when "no one was there". Sometimes rural students who are low scorers can receive explicit humiliation from classmates. As told in Huo's story, when he asked his desk-mate for help with English questions, a classmate with better English said, "How come you don't understand such a simple question...No need to teach him! This is too damn easy". Huo got ridicule and contempt, rather than help, from his classmates.

The above discussion of rural students' experiences with EFL learning suggests that rural students often feel embarrassed and ashamed in their EFL classes. In the EFL class the global knowledge and oral English skills are often valued for participating in learning activities; an extrovert personality and the ability to make friends with foreigners are promoted and admired; the grading in EFL exams is used

to identify hard-working students from the lazy ones. These cultures and practices exclude the students who are not able to speak in English and to achieve high grades in exams. This finding suggests that the EFL classes often reject rural students' existing knowledge, learning strategies, and even their personalities, preventing them from participating in the learning activities and learning communities. The labeling, isolation and humiliation by their teachers and classmates build up their feelings of unworthiness and inferiority to their classmates with higher EFL proficiency or exam scores.

As a consequence of the exclusion from the EFL class community, rural students either adapt themselves to self-abasement and humiliation, or increase their investment of diligence in learning. For example, Chong chose to give up learning after years of efforts to get passing grades ended up with failure, Huo chose to suppress his anger about being humiliated, and Mang exerted her best effort after being isolated by her classmates due to her low ranking in an exam. Li (2010) presents a similar observation of Chinese EFL rural students. Rural students go through a difficult process of adapting themselves to low positions when they realize that the capital they possess is useless for EFL learning. They either take a *laissez-faire* attitude towards EFL learning, or count on extremely diligent study. Li argues that the lack of dominant cultural capital makes it difficult for rural students to achieve academic success. My finding based on rural students' stories, however, shows that rural students' lower position is associated with the dominant conceptualizing of the good EFL learner in

the EFL class community.

5.1.3 Hesitant Investors

Rural participants' stories also show their hesitant and ambiguous attitudes towards EFL learning, which resonates with the view of Norton and Gao (2008) that learners may develop their ambivalent desires to learn the language (p.110). The participants described their mixed desires and conflicting feelings for EFL learning.

5.1.3.1 Town Dreams

Most of the participants in my research located their future life and work in a town. This aspiration is obviously different from the typical imagined community of EFL learners. Findings based in a wide range of contexts, such as Pakistan (Norton & Kamal, 2003), the U.K. (Li & Simpson, 2013) and China (Gao, 2008; Gao et al., 2008) show that the community of English speakers are typically imagined as educated well-paid urban professionals by EFL or ESL learners. In my study, only two participants, Wan and Mang, constructed a similar community featuring an exotic and exciting life in a modern international city. The rest of the participants did not show strong desires to participate in this type of imagined community for various reasons.

The rural student participants revealed in their stories their strong sense of responsibility for parents and other family members, taking their family as the primary concern of workplace selection. For the purpose of looking after her parents and family, Zhi chose to compromise her dream of being a traveling interpreter to being a

teacher close to her home village. Mang made a different plan to balance her future work and her responsibility for looking after parents. She wanted to invest her diligent study in a future job that could offer her more free time for staying with parents. Huo had the same conflict between his own ideal workplace and his family's wish. His decision was to give up his urban dream and follow his family's advice to work in a place as close as possible to his rural home. In contrast to Zhi, Mang and Huo who gave up their dreams to their family's needs, Hong, Bei and Chong's ideal workplace was a town close to their parents and home. Hong regarded looking after family members as his future dream. Bei's dream was to be a teacher in a town high school, while Chong expected to find a job in a hydropower plant near his home village.

It can be seen from the above discussion that rural students often carry a strong responsibility for looking after family members. When their own dream conflicts with the family's needs, they may give up their dream to the family, or figure out a way to compromise with the family. Some rural students consider taking good care of the family as their dream. The dream work of rural students can be of stable income, living in the town and looking after their parents in the home village. This dream, obviously, contrasts with the exciting life in the modern international city as constructed in the imagined community of successful EFL learners. Committed investment in the imagined community of EFL learners suggests to many rural students working as urban professionals and abandoning their family responsibilities. For rural students, being a successful EFL learner often implies leaving their rural

family and home village, which may be against their wills.

Similarly, Corbett (2007) emphasizes that educators need to be aware of their implied notion that rural students must learn to leave their home. In Corbett's study of the education in Canadian rural communities, rural youth may resist the mobility embedded in education and want to stay around the home community. In my study, though none of the participants said they would stay in the village, they showed either ambivalent or resistant attitudes towards the implied mobility in learning English. The rural students in my study were confronted with a challenge similar to that raised in Corbett's study—an important part of education is learning to leave. The participants in my study chose the town as a place for future life and work—where they were able to strike the balance of securing a job and taking up family responsibilities at the same time. These rural students learn to leave their home villages, but are not willing to live far from their families.

5.1.3.2 Puzzles Unsolved

Two puzzles were found in participants' stories that had remained unsolved throughout their years of EFL learning. The rural students were hesitant to make a devoted investment before they obtained answers to these two questions. One of the puzzles is “why should I learn such a useless and difficult language?” As a student from a rural village, Bei had been puzzled by this question for years. He understood English as a language essential for advanced levels of education such as the postgraduate level. Bei said English would be no use for his future job as a physics or

mathematics teacher in a town high school. Both his parents and teacher requested him to learn English well, but neither of them offered the answer to his puzzle. For Chong, English was absolutely useless in his practical life out of class. It was not even any use in watching English movies because there were always Chinese subtitles available. Zhi was confused about the purpose of learning a difficult language for some time and was told by her father that enduring more difficulty would be paid off with more knowledge. What are the uses of English for rural students for their daily life and their future? This question is raised by the participants of the research and remains unanswered in their stories. This puzzle prevents them from making commitment to investing in EFL learning.

Another question that remained unanswered for rural students is “why does my diligence work for all school subjects but English?” Lacking economic capital, family capital and the dominant cultural capital that are helpful in EFL learning (Hamid, 2009; Li, 2010), rural students count heavily on their persistence and perseverance in their school study. If their investment of diligence produces little improvement in the subject of English, what else can rural students depend upon? Chong felt extremely helpless at his repeated failure in tests as a result of his persistent efforts over most of the high school period. He eventually decided to give it up. Bei’s puzzle was that even following the teacher’s instruction and guidance did not help much with English learning. He showed evidence by comparing his high achievement in Physics and Mathematics with his low scores in English by 20 to 30

points compared to others'. In order to improve his English school achievement, Huo made efforts to learn English words by rote, but then found that did not solve the problem. From their experience of the inefficiency of diligence in English learning, rural students learn that the results of EFL learning are out of their control. This experience is quite different from their study of other school subjects. As a result, they are likely to suspend their investment in EFL learning to avoid overwhelming feelings of helplessness.

5.1.3.3 A Rural View of EFL

Based on the stories told by the rural students, there are two conflicting views of English in the village. One is that English is difficult and useless. This resistant attitude towards EFL is often passed over from the elder students in the village to the younger ones. Chong related in his story, "in my home village, there were some Da Gege and Da Jiejie (literally translated as big brothers and big sisters, meaning elder boys and girls) at Grade 8 and 9. They told me English is so difficult, and no use at all". Zhi had the same experience. "Before I started learning English, I heard people from the village, those Da Gege and Da Jiejie say, 'oh, English is too difficult. You cannot understand it at all, and cannot remember English words no matter how much you try'". This negative attitude towards English can have a long-lasting impact on younger rural students. Learning of this view from elder brothers and sisters, Zhi had such a fear of the upcoming EFL course that she even hesitated to start junior middle school. Chong attributed his repeated EFL frustrations to this attitude, "I didn't

possess any favourable opinion about English at the very beginning, so I can't learn it well now." What Chong and Zhi called "elder brothers" and "elder sisters" are their elder village peers who are not blood-related, but often in close relationship with them. They are their childhood companions, close friends and playmates. These elder brothers' and sisters' resistant view may become rural kids' initial understanding of English, influencing their perspective and learning in the future. Moreover, this view of English as difficult and useless is immediately confirmed by the younger rural students themselves. For example, Chong said, "then I find it is indeed useless in practice". In Bei's view, "if you...going back and teaching in a junior high school in a town, English is useless". This resistance to EFL is passed down, confirmed and likely to pass over to the younger kids again.

Compared with the resistant view among some rural students who have accumulated some frustrating experiences of EFL, parents seem to show a more positive attitude. In her story, Zhi related how her father encouraged her to overcome difficulties in EFL learning. "My Dad said 'You must. It is good to have difficulties. The more difficulties you overcome, the more you will learn'". Bei also related his parents' attitudes towards EFL. "They told me to learn English well. They heard about it from others. They emphasized hard work". For Yu, it was his parents and teacher who helped him with gathering up his courage to keep on with EFL learning. "I felt I suddenly fell into a bottomless abyss. I felt very self-abased in English learning. Under teachers' and parents' encouragement, I gradually caught them up." It can be

seen from the above quotes that rural parents often encourage their children to work hard at EFL learning, which is different from the resistant view of English widely spread among the younger generation.

As shown in the stories told by the rural participants, two conflicting views of EFL co-exist in rural areas. The negative one takes the standpoint that there is no need to learn English because it is useless and difficult, whereas another encourages EFL learning. The former view is obviously contradictory to the current mainstream narrative that English is valuable and useful for the pursuit of education and jobs. The latter also seems to stand with the dominant view of EFL as valuable and useful, but shows a slight nuance. What the rural parents encourage is not to enter elite schools and get well-paid jobs, but to work hard and to overcome difficulties in EFL learning. These two contradictory views of English in the village, along with the dominant one in the context of urbanizing China, may make rural students hesitant to invest in EFL learning.

This section discusses three types of attitudes that rural students often hold towards investing in EFL learning. The findings of this study suggest that rural students often experience a trajectory of making their best efforts to learn EFL, being frustrated by repeated failure in exams and assignments, and then choosing to give up learning or to be more diligent in studying. The results show that rural students' investing in EFL is often excluded from dominant EFL cultures in and out of the classroom. Their pessimistic view about the rewards of EFL learning, their disbelief in

the instrumental value of English, and their dream of a stable town life seem difficult to fit into the dominant EFL discourses in China today. In the next section, I will discuss this dominant EFL discourse with regard to EFL imagined communities.

5.2 EFL Imagined Community Constructed in Narratives

In the previous section, I discussed rural students positioned themselves as pessimistic, ashamed and hesitant investors of EFL learning. This section is a discussion of how rural students related these perceptions to their imagining of EFL community through their storytelling. As discussed in Chapter 2, imagined community is an important theoretical construct in the poststructural theory of language learner identity. Learners need to develop their capacity for imagining a wide range of communities related to the language to achieve the ownership of the target language (Norton, 2010). Several existing studies explore the diversity of EFL communities constructed by learners in different contexts, such as religious and international communities (Norton & Kamal, 2003), or postcolonial and ethnic communities (Norton and Pavlenko, 2007). However, in this section, I focus on the EFL imagined communities that were discursively constructed within the participants' narratives of challenge. I demonstrate the community members, the residence places and the community lifestyles that are narrated in the participants' stories as relevant to their challenge in EFL learning. Then I seek the dominant values and ideologies gradually emerging from the participants' narratives of EFL imagined community, and discuss

how these dominant values are related to rural students' challenge in EFL learning.

5.2.1 Community Members

According to stories told by the rural participants, many people are regarded as members of EFL imagined communities and various qualities of the members are admired and desired by rural students. These members generally are able to speak fluent English and sometimes with good pronunciation and accent. In Huo's story, they were the peer students from the English department in the same university. "The English major students are so capable. They stress some utterances and lighten up others... I think it is difficult for me to accomplish it all through my life." He also admired those classmates who "sometimes popped out one or two English sentences, or English words" in their daily conversation and thought "How clever they are! We are far behind them." Juan talked about his classmates in senior middle school who were confident in speaking English when she was embarrassed about her own. Wan referred to street vendors, servers in restaurants and even middle school students he saw in Shanghai who spoke fluent English. He reminded himself not to be content with his current state, but instead to make efforts to catch up with those fluent speakers. High marks in EFL exams are another key for students to participate in the EFL imagined community. Based on Mang's story, students with high marks were admired, followed and respected. Certain personalities are also admired as part of the members of the EFL imagined community. Duo's story depicted a learning model who

gave a seminar to freshmen on how to study English and communicate with foreigners. This model, a senior female schoolmate, was “very active” and “likes making friends with foreigners”, but Duo herself was “not open-minded enough.”

As discussed above, certain qualities are considered legitimate for membership in the EFL imagined community, such as fluent English and high grading in English exams. Rural students are often excluded from this community if they don't possess those qualities that are assumed to be necessary for membership. Fluent spoken English, as one of the criteria for the membership, was a serious concern for Zhi when she started her senior middle school. She felt embarrassed about her accent and could not open her mouth in front of classmates and foreign teachers. Yu could not open his mouth in group discussions but for different reasons—lack of necessary knowledge on the discussion topics. Unable to speak English with an acceptable accent or to display knowledge of western culture in discussions, Zhi and Yu are not qualified to be admitted to the EFL imagined community. High marks in English exams, another threshold to the community, can also exclude a large number of rural students. Many of the participants in this research could not even achieve a passing grading, let alone a high score. For example, both Hong and Chong failed in almost all English tests since starting EFL courses. Furthermore, sometimes this exclusion can become explicit and confrontational. When Huo asked his desk mate an EFL question, one of his classmates whose English was better mocked him and said there was “no need to teach” him. After ranking the 40th in the first EFL exam in senior middle

school, Mang was isolated from the majority—the high scorers and their followers. Summarizing the discussion on members of EFL imagined community, rural students are often excluded when they are not able to present fluent oral English, high marks in English exams, an extroverted personality or knowledge of western culture.

5.2.2 Places to Live

Stories told by the participants reveal that certain types of places are considered ideal for community members to live and work in the future. Wan's narratives on his experience with Shanghai suggests that his imagined community is located in Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou, three major metropolises of China. He claimed, "the gap between cities is very very huge". In his eyes, these three cities were developed, modern and international. Besides, Wan had an American dream—studying and living in the U.S.. Similarly, Duo regarded Beijing as the host place for the most talented and hardworking EFL students. She also held a dream to "go outside, have a look at other countries." Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen are the four economically strongest cities, usually called "first-tier cities". Wan and Duo appeared confident in their future life of living and working in these ideal places. Since it was very hard to achieve their goals, they tried their utmost to learn English. "I work very hard after class. They don't see it. I trimmed the lamp to read at night", Duo said. Lei chose to settle in a city in China with her parents. Because of her major in Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language, Lei dreamed of

working in another country as a teacher of Chinese. However, she thought there was a very slim chance to realize this dream and made a more realistic choice to settle in a city with her parents.

Slightly different from Lei, some participants would like to spend their future life in a city, but remain pessimistic about it. As Hong commented, “employment here is very difficult, because many graduates from other universities are stronger in their field.” Similarly, Huo and Hong had a low expectation of realizing their dreams of working in the city and were resigned to the idea of living in towns. It can be seen that both Hong and Huo hold city dreams, but had to be realistic about their future based on their academic records and the employment competition in the city. Those who are not competitive enough in academic records and job competitions can be excluded from a future life in the city.

Compared with the U.S. dreamer and city dreamers, some rural participants are confident in their town dreams. Details can be found in the previous section of “Town Dreams”. Bei, Chong and Zhi shared their dream of working and living in a town close to their home villages. In the context of China’s urbanization, it is less likely for rural university students to find employment if they go back to their home village after graduation. Their chances are also slim to realize their dream of working in cities. In this situation, towns, in between villages and cities (as shown in figure 1 Cities, towns and villages in the administrative division system of China), become an ideal place for many rural students to balance their professional dreams and their

responsibility for parents and siblings.

To summarize this section on ideal places to work and live in the future, while it is extremely difficult for rural students to fulfill their metropolis or city dreams, town dreams are often preferred by many. My study shows that a couple of participants are investing extreme diligence in EFL learning and still hold on to their U.S. dreams and metropolitan dreams, aligning themselves with typical members of the EFL imagined community. However, for the storytellers who hold a pessimistic view of their city dreams, they are likely to be excluded from the EFL community if they cannot secure a city job. The rest of the participants show little interest in living in the city in the future. Instead of pursuing an ideal profession, taking care of parents and younger siblings is often the primary concern in their selecting where to work and live in the future. This different attitude can be an important aspect of their resistance against participating in the typical EFL imagined community located in large and international cities.

5.2.3 Lifestyles in the Imagined Community

Stories told by the participants not only suggest the typical places where the members of EFL imagined community live and work, but also portray what lifestyles they have in the community. Firstly the community members live a cosmopolitan life in an international community. In Wan's story, the street vendors in Shanghai were "on roller skates selling goods to foreigners" with fluent English, and restaurant servers

waited on customers from around the world in English. Duo presented a similar description of her EFL learning model who had many foreign friends and knew how to make friends with them. Members of the EFL imagined community can be elite students who are talented and industrious. This construction of international and global communities can also be found in studies by Norton and Kamal (2003), Norton and Pavlenko (2007) and Zhang (2011) for example. Gao et al.'s (2008) study presents Chinese students' desires to become educated bilingual elites different from the monolingual majority.

Another feature of the community life is diligence in improving English. Duo mentioned the students studying in an elite university in Beijing who "read English books till midnight, then get up at 5:30 in the morning and stare at the computer screen", regretting his dorm mates who "watch TV series and play games on cell phones". In addition, the life in the community can be easy and free according to Mang's imagining. "Life in the world of English is free and easy... Everything is directed by spirit, not bound by the surrounding conditions...in the world of English, it is the spirit that bounds conditions, such as environment, family and friends. In the world of English, I can do whatever I want." Qu (2011, p.304) points out that the definition of freedom or liberty in Chinese discourse is different from that in English. It is "ziyou" in Chinese meaning "free will" and "one is free to do whatever one wills". For this reason, Mang believed "I need to work very hard now, so that I will have more time and more freedom in the future".

Different from the imagining of elites' lives in the international community, the rest of the storytellers imagine a relatively stable routine life in towns in the future. Bei's dream was not to "go upward", but "going back and teaching in a junior high school in a town" after his graduation. Chong aspired to become a schoolteacher in a town so that he would have many opportunities to communicate with his students and much spare time for his own interest. Different from Wan and Duo, these students prioritize the responsibility for taking care of parents and younger siblings over their ideal profession. As Zhi said, "if I am an interpreter, I must go abroad. I really don't want to drift outside; I want to be closer to my family". Even for Huo whose dream was to work in the city, his future plan was "to be as close to them [his parents] as possible", because "my family asks me to go back to the town. They say the town is close to home. If I go somewhere very far, I can't look after the family in case of emergency." Hong said he was the first son and would be the head of the family in the future. He wanted to work close to home, "so that it is convenient to look after my family." Their stories suggest their strong sense of responsibility for taking care of aging parents and village family in the future. In addition, Zhi and Duo's stories also highlighted the strong impacts of their parents on their attitudes toward study and life. Duo regarded her parents as role models. "It is about hardship and diligence. I don't like reading inspirational stories. My parents' experiences are inspirational enough...My experience exemplifies that hardship and diligence paid off with good returns too." Zhi viewed her parents' model of being "a good person" as "nothing that

someone else can give” and “especially important”.

To sum up this section, the rural students in the study construct different lifestyles in imagining the EFL imagined community. Duo, Wan and Mang imagined a typical way of life in an international community in large cities—contacting people from around the world and working hard at English. However, the rest of participants imagined a relatively stable and routine life in the town that was close to their parents and home village. These two contrasting lifestyles represent their different values and beliefs in EFL learning, which will be discussed in the following section.

5.2.4 The Dominant Ideology in Imagining EFL Communities

This section discusses the dominant ideology emerging from the participants’ narratives of the members, the residence place and the lifestyles of the imagined community of EFL speakers, and how the dominance of the ideology is related to rural students’ challenge in EFL learning.

Typically in the EFL imagined community, English is believed to be legitimate capital to pursue job and education. As reviewed in Chapter 2, Heller’s (2010) theory of commodification of language argues for the acknowledged status of English as material, cultural and symbolic capital in postcolonial and developing countries. A series of studies based in China, Bolton and Graddol (2012), Norton, and Gao (2008) and Gao (2012) for example, show that English establishes its legitimacy as an instrument for pursuing higher level education and better-paid jobs. Fluent

English speakers in China, therefore, are often conceptualized as educated bilingual elites living in big cities (Gao et al., 2008). Members of the EFL imagined community usually have a strong belief in this instrumental value of English, and expectations of its return of material and symbolic resources. Norton (2010) claims that EFL learners invest in learning English, expecting to have more material and symbolic capital in return. Both Li and Simpson (2013) and Gao (2008) find language learners believe that EFL learning will lead to higher salaries, successful careers and an easier life sometime in the future.

However, the findings from this research show that not all rural students have confidence in the instrumental value of English. On the contrary, an overwhelming view among village students is that English is useless, as told in stories of Zhi, Chong and Bei. As Bei claimed, “if you don’t want to go upwards, going back and teaching in a junior high school in a town, for example, English is useless”. More discussion on rural views of English can be found in the section “Hesitant Investors”. The rural students perceiving English as useless are obviously excluded from the EFL imagined community. Results of the study also show that though some rural students believe in the instrumental value of English, they have low expectations of its returns. EFL learning is a high-cost low-return investment in terms of their academic success and future employment. Discussion on their pessimistic views of EFL can be found in the section of “Pessimistic investors” in this chapter. In the EFL imagined community valuing the instrumentality of English, the rural students who are pessimistic about the

returns of EFL are likely to be excluded. Moreover, even for Wan, Duo and Mang who believe in the high returns of EFL learning, they paid extreme and persistent diligence for realizing their EFL dreams, which is not common among students. According to Ding (2007), although repetition and memorization are regarded as effective strategies by successful EFL learners, only a small number of students really apply it to their own learning because they require long-term and intensive practices.

The instrumental ideology of EFL is closely related to the construction of EFL imagined community. Influenced by the ideology that English is a practical tool for education and employment, many EFL learners aspire to become cosmopolitan elites working in megacities. The learners whose belief, values and experiences are not compatible with this dominant ideology may be excluded from the typical community. However, the exclusion of rural students is not easy to detect. Tollefson (1991) illustrates covertness of the exclusionary power of language ideology.

Ideology contributes to the manufacture of consent because it leads to (ideological) assumptions about right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. That is, ideology shapes behaviour. Yet, because it is largely unconscious, ideology is inherently conservative. (p.11)

The dominant EFL ideology in China rejects rural students' skeptical view of English, values of life and cultures rooted in rurality. The EFL education in China, though including most rural students in an attempt to improve educational and social equity, sustains the power relationships by way of accepting those who believe in the

dominant ideology and excluding others who do not. This instrumental ideology inherent in China's foreign language education imposes hegemonic force covertly on rural students in their EFL learning. The next section is a discussion of how the EFL teaching practices in China are related to the promoting the dominance of instrumental language ideology.

5.3 The Context of EFL Education Constructed within Narratives

The discussion in the previous sections suggests that rural students perceive their challenge in EFL learning as relevant to the homogeneous way of constructing imagined community of EFL learners and the dominant instrumental ideology in EFL learning. Rural EFL learners in China are often imposed upon covert exclusionary forces in participating in the EFL imagined community due to their conflicting perceptions and views of EFL learning to the dominant ones. This section focuses on how the rural participants construct the context of EFL education within their narratives of challenge. Three aspects of EFL teaching emerge prominent from the participants' narrations of the challenges in EFL learning—cultural contents in EFL textbooks, oral communicative activities, and the teaching of international teachers. The following section provides a detailed illustration of how these three aspects of EFL teaching are discursively constructed within the participants' stories as imposing subtle exclusion on rural students.

5.3.1 Cultural Contents in EFL Textbooks

Though cultural contents in EFL textbooks are only mentioned in one story, it can be a serious issue contributing to the exclusiveness of the EFL imagined community for rural students. In his story, Yu expressed his depression and self-abasement about being unable to participate in a group discussion on athletes from Western countries as an extension of the text topic of Olympic Games. Yu said, “We might know something about Chinese athletes, but not the foreign ones.” Yu obviously neither had knowledge of Western athletes nor access to it. Rural students are usually considered disadvantaged in EFL learning due to their lack of certain cultural knowledge and limited access to the knowledge (eg. Li, 2010; Hamid, 2009). However, we overlook how certain contents of the textbook can prevent students from participating in learning activities. As Yu said, “when the moment came, I was in great pain in fact. I was unable to join them and felt excluded. They all knew about what they were discussing, but we didn’t have a hint of it.” Yu was depressed because teachers’ help and his own efforts did not work in solving the problem. Yu also said his village peers shared this experience. The EFL textbook, as the embodiment of cultural constructs and carriers of cultural messages (Gray, 2002), is one of the important factors that impact the shaping of the dominant culture in the imagined communities of EFL learners. Based on the findings from the study, some cultural contents in the textbook, the world’s fastest runners or American movies, for example,

contribute to constructing the type of imagined communities that alienate rural students whose existing knowledge and prior experience based in rural life and culture are excluded.

A common practice in China is that schools and universities choose from several sets of English textbooks that are approved by the national education authority for education. Most of the EFL textbooks are designed and edited by Chinese scholars and educators. Governed by the unitary standard of the national curriculum, the currently used EFL textbooks are mostly framed in the theory of multiculturalism and against the backdrop of globalization (Wang, 2010). A great emphasis in cultural aspects of the textbooks is placed on developing students' awareness of cultural differences between China and western countries, and preparing them for future cross-cultural experiences. Under such a cross-cultural framework, the textbooks used in China are occupied with cultures of English-speaking countries and communications between the Chinese and people from other cultures. When I browsed the EFL textbooks at different levels, it was not surprising to find such contents as celebrating a birthday with foreign friends, going on a vacation in New York City, learning table manners in Western culture, visiting theme parks in the U.S., or protecting wild animals in Zimbabwe. These types of contents that have been regarded as value-free are indeed related to the shaping of students' imagination of the community of English speakers. The prevalence of these contents promotes cosmopolitan culture and urban values, completely disconnected from rural students'

knowledge, experiences, aspirations and values.

As a matter of fact, themes and topics on overseas travel are common in the global ELT textbooks produced in English-speaking countries. Holiday, travel and tourism are viewed as safe topics that won't be culturally offensive to buyers from around the world (Gray, 2002). However, these topics are not really value-free. Brown (1990) points out that, in modern ELT materials, the language is more focussed on travel and extended to relevant leisure activities. The conversation situations in textbooks are often travelling, international airports, hotels or train stations, while the topics are sports, pop music and fashion. Brown (1990) calls it "cosmopolitan English".

That kind of English assumes a materialistic set of values in which international travel, not being bored, positively being entertained, having leisure, and, above all, spending money casually and without consideration of the sum involved in the pursuit of these ends, are the norm. (p.13)

The EFL textbook in China focusing on cultural differences and cross-cultural communication is assumed to be free from the hegemony of western ideology and culture; however, it falls into the category of "cosmopolitan English" that promotes a specific set of urban values. Though Chinese scholars criticize the cultural contents of the EFL textbook, most of the criticism focuses on the overemphasis on cultures of the U.K and the U.S., and the deficiency of Chinese culture in general (Li & Liu, 2007; Wang, 2010).

I am not trying to challenge the multicultural and cross-cultural framework underlying the Chinese EFL textbooks. My argument is that scholars and educators need to pay attention to the dominance of cosmopolitan culture and urban values in textbook contents, because this promotes the hegemony of instrumental language ideology over rural students. This cosmopolitan nature of textbooks, combined with linguistic difficulties, exerts a subtle form of exclusionary force on rural students preventing them from participating in the EFL imagined community. Though culture teaching is a tough mission in EFL teaching, the dominance of cosmopolitan culture and values should be broken in order to reduce the hegemonic forces to which rural students are subject. Involving rural knowledge, experience, dreams, and values in EFL textbook contents is expected to provide a better chance for breaking the ideological dominance.

5.3.2 Oral Communicative Class Activities

The findings of the study show that rural students are often encouraged to learn EFL by way of speaking. Those students who are good at speaking can be promoted as learning models and admired by schoolmates. Among them are Duo's senior schoolmate with rich experiences of communicating with foreign friends, Huo's classmates mixing English words and sentences in their daily conversations, and Juan's classmates speaking with confidence. A detailed discussion can be found in the section of "Community members" in this chapter.

Speaking is generally viewed as an essential and effective way of learning EFL. However, promoting learning by speaking can exclude some students who are not comfortable with it. According to the participants' stories, there are learning activities such as the self-introduction, the group discussion, the oral report and the talk with the foreign teacher in and out of their EFL class in junior and senior middle school to encourage students to learn by speaking. However, these storytellers appeared reticent in these activities. For example, Yu regretted not having spoken up in the EFL class. "He (the teacher) then asked us to introduce ourselves in English. I was very shy at that time, and dared not speak up. Many of my classmates did, but I didn't." Yu also had experiences of being excluded from the group discussion on certain topics as we discussed in the section "Cultural contents in EFL textbooks". Juan was embarrassed to open her mouth to speak English in class. She said, "I had many schoolmates. Once they spoke English, I felt ashamed of my own pronunciation. I felt gloomy at that time and didn't want to open my mouth." There are different reasons for students to keep their mouth closed in learning English. For example, Kim (2013) finds Japanese university EFL students' non-participation in the oral class activities is related to their unfamiliarity with the topics and sensitivity to others' judgment.

As discussed above, rural students often don't feel comfortable with learning EFL by speaking or through oral communication activities. They often learn English in the way that they study other subjects and in other classes. As discussed in the

section of “Hesitant investors” in this chapter, many rural students have the question—why does diligence for all school subjects except English? Bei said, “I can sit side by side with others in the subjects of Physics and Mathematics, but not in English”. Hong made similar comments, “I can look for a way by myself to improve Chinese and Math, but foreign language studies. Based on my professional experience in China, a typical class in the Chinese school is: the teacher giving lectures for most of the class time, writing key points on the blackboard and asking students questions occasionally; students listening attentively and copying or taking notes down. The students who listen attentively in class and spend time remembering the key points after class often secure a high school achievement.

According to the participants’ stories, learning by listening to lectures and memorizing key points did not work as effectively for EFL learning as for other subjects. Listening to teachers and remembering words are repeatedly mentioned as important ways of EFL learning in the stories told. As Chong said, “the teacher just asked us to remember words after class...memorizing words, I felt I couldn’t by any means.” Bei said that “I followed the way that the teacher told us to remember the words, but the low score remained.” Huo also said, “I memorized many words. But it did not solve all problems.” In Ding’s (2007) study, repetitive practice and rote learning are found to be viewed as effective in EFL learning by several winners of the national English public speaking competition. However, these strategies are practised in a unique way. The winning students watched English movies and drama episodes,

imitated the intonation patterns and memorized lines. Ding also pointed out that not every student could take advantage of rote learning in EFL because it required long-term and intensive practice. For Chong, Bei and Huo, listening to teachers in class and memorizing key points after class helped them with most school subjects except English, making them feel frustrated and helpless.

Emphasis on learning by speaking and participating in oral communicative activities is an element of EFL teaching practice that contributes to the exclusion of rural students. Greatly influenced by the concept that language is a tool for communication, EFL education in China emphasizes the development of students' oral communicative competence as an important part of EFL teaching. Oral communication activities provide opportunities for students to improve their communicative competence by using and speaking English. The goal of the class activities, such as self-introduction, role-play and group discussion, is to encourage students to speak English. Many teachers and researchers in China are interested in how to break the silence of students and encourage participation in speaking activities in EFL class (e.g., Cheng, 2011; Luo, 2011; Yin & Miao, 2008). It is taken for granted that the more oral communication activities there are, the better the EFL class would be.

Cameron's (2002) study uncovers the tenet underlying this emphasis on oral communication skills. According to her study, this emphasis is the consequence of the shifting of the conceptualization and experience of work in the global era. The spoken

language that used to be viewed as irrelevant to manual workers in the manufacturing industry is now highly valued in the global labour market with the rise of such new economies as telephone service and tourism. It can be seen from Cameron's (2002) analysis that the emphasis on oral communication competence is basically serving the new economy and global market. Drawing on Cameron's perspective, the EFL class highlighting speaking skills is an example of this orientation at work towards the demands of the new economy and global markets. Combined with the impacts of rapid urbanization, this orientation becomes more a prominent pulling force for EFL education in China and, consequently, imposes hegemony on rural students who are accustomed to study by listening and memorizing.

5.3.3 Foreign Teachers

This section is a discussion on Waijiao, an emerging issue in EFL teaching in China that is potentially related to rural students' challenges in learning. "Waijiao" is a Chinese phrase literally meaning "foreign teachers", or teachers coming from other countries. Though it is not a repeatedly-mentioned topic in their stories, two participants referred to the influences of foreign teachers on their attitudes towards themselves. Juan felt great pressure when she entered her senior middle school. "When the foreign teacher talked with me, I didn't know how to respond to him. I didn't understand much of what he said. I did well in the written part, but not in pronouncing...I felt a bit embarrassed." Juan felt embarrassed because she was

different from the majority of students who understood what the foreign teacher said and gave the appropriate responses to it. As a result, Juan “felt gloomy at that time and didn’t want to open my mouth.” It is surprising to know that Juan’s senior middle school hired a foreign teacher because it is a rare practice for most public secondary schools in small cities. In China today, foreign teachers are more common in universities and private schools, particularly in such megacities as Beijing and Shanghai. Rural students typically do not have any access to foreign teachers unless they enter an elite high school in the city or a department of foreign languages at university. Juan was admitted to one of the best high schools in the region and yet was denied the opportunity to communicate with foreign teachers. Similarly to the situations discussed in the sections of “Ashamed investors” and “Learning by speaking”, rural students like Juan who are unable to talk with foreign teachers often place themselves in a lower position than the majority of students who can do so.

Wan’s story told about how the assignment given by his foreign teacher at university made him aware that he was lagging behind American students:

“...the foreign teacher...said those (books) were for the students in Grade One and Two in America. He said we hadn’t read them before and let us read...Now we read the books that American primary students read. They are so slim.”

As discussed in 5.2.2 Places to Live, Wan was among the few participants who yearned to live in an international community. His dream was to study and live in the U.S. Though he was somewhat puzzled about those “slim books”, Wan read them as a

way to catch up with American peers. This foreign teacher from the U.S. may have had certain pedagogical purposes in giving this assignment. However, it could be problematic for Wan to understand the assignment as a sign of gaps between Chinese and American students. “I feel if we don’t develop the habits of English reading in junior and senior high school, we will lag behind by ten years.” The assignment may indeed become problematic if this foreign teacher really thinks his university students in China lag behind and need to make up for their linguistic and cultural deficiency. It is not the foreign teachers’ intention to make rural Chinese students think they are deficient and they lag behind. However, foreign teachers in China need to be more cautious in their contact with rural students. As I discussed before, rural students are often pessimistic and ashamed EFL investors. Foreign teachers, not knowing about rural students’ particular experiences with EFL learning, may unconsciously add hegemony on their EFL learning.

In China, speakers from English-speaking countries are preferred as EFL foreign teachers in schools and universities to provide students with access to the English and the Western culture perceived to be authentic. Phillipson (1990) is concerned about the transferring and spanning of the structure of dominance of English and its ideologies through the teaching of English-speaking teachers in other countries. Holliday (2015) suggests that there is a wide-spread Western cultural disbelief in non-Western cultural realities—native-speakerism among native English speaking teachers. This disbelief is hard to remove and has dominated the global ELT

discourse for decades. The teachers labeled as native speakers are always considered “steward” to be imitated and copied, while non-native speakers are deficient linguistically and culturally. More importantly, this “West as steward” discourse is hard to detect because since it takes cover in Western liberal multiculturalism and an “inclusive” and “nice” teaching profession (Holliday, 2015, p.19). Wolff and Qiang (2009), however, present another perspective of foreign teachers’ teaching in China. Based on the experiences of English-speaking teachers in China, they criticize the low recruitment standards and certain misconceptions about foreign teachers. They point out that the foreign teacher is often not considered as a profession, but a work to chat with and entertain students. There are many unqualified English-speaking teachers recruited when they receive the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) certificate after a quick training (usually seven days). With an increasing number of English speakers coming to China and teach EFL, it is a new challenge to accustom these international teachers to the local context. It is still a new research area how EFL teaching of international teachers impacts the local Chinese students’ attitudes towards themselves and EFL learning.

5.4 Summary

This chapter discussed rural students’ experiences and challenges in EFL learning. Rural Chinese students often held pessimistic and hesitant attitudes towards investing in EFL learning. These students either had low expectations of the rewards

of EFL learning, or regarded English as useless in terms of their dream lives in the town. Rural students often held a skeptical view of the value of English in their education and employment. A typical imagined community of EFL learners was discursively constructed within the participants' narratives of the challenge in EFL learning. In this community, the English-speaking professional elites lived an exciting and easy lifestyle in an international megacity. Moreover, this community prioritized the instrumental value of English, the cosmopolitan lifestyle and the oral communicative competence of English. These dominant concepts structuring the EFL imagined community often imposed subtle exclusionary force upon rural students whose beliefs and ideologies did not fit into the community. Furthermore, a context of EFL education in China was discursively constructed within the participants' narratives. The participants narrated this context-- dominance of the cosmopolitan culture in textbook contents and prevalence of communicative teaching approach—in a way that it contributed to their challenge in EFL learning.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

This is the concluding chapter of the thesis. I first summarize the research project. Then I present the implications of the research, explaining how this research contributes to EFL theories and pedagogies. The concluding part deals with the limitations of the research and recommendations for further research.

6.1 Summary of the Research Project

It is a serious problem that many rural Chinese students lose their opportunities for further education and future employment because of their failure in EFL study. This phenomenon has been regarded as a consequence of rural students' deficiency in economic, social and cultural capital. In order to attain a more nuanced understanding of rural students' challenges in EFL learning, I took a poststructural approach and investigate how rural students understand the connection between their challenge and EFL education in China. This research explored what challenges rural students have experienced with EFL learning and how they related their challenges to the structural system of EFL education. Designed in life story research, this study used life story interview to collect data. A narrative approach was adopted to analyze the participants' stories of EFL learning in terms of the factual details of challenges and the narrations of the EFL context within which the challenges were discursively

constructed.

Twelve rural student participants presented factual information on their experiences, emotions and aspirations in their stories of EFL learning over their years of formal education. Moreover, they discursively constructed a context of China's EFL education in their narratives of the challenge. The findings based on a narrative analysis of the stories show that EFL education in China prioritizes the instrumental language ideology. Under this ideological framework, a series of concepts and practices are dominant in EFL teaching, for example, the belief in exchange value of English, the cosmopolitan culture and values in textbook contents, and communicative teaching approach. These dominant concepts and practices in EFL teaching subtly exclude the students whose belief and values do not fit into the dominant language ideology. The findings of the study reveal that rural students often develop pessimistic, ashamed and hesitant attitudes towards investing in EFL learning. Their belief and values, such as skeptical view of value of English, prioritizing of family obligation and dreams of a mundane life in towns, do not conform to instrumental language ideology. The rural student participants related their challenges in EFL learning to the context of EFL education that imposes subtle exclusionary forces upon them. I argue that EFL education in China, though its inclusion of rural students is usually regarded as a progress in educational equity, often sustains power relationships in a very covert way. The dominance of instrumental language ideology imposes hegemonic forces on rural students in their EFL learning. In the next section, I discuss how these findings

based on rural students' partial understanding of the connections between their challenge in EFL learning and the context of EFL education inform the structural system of research and teaching practices in EFL education.

6.2 Implications of the Research

The findings of the research provide theoretical and practical implications for improving current EFL education in China to be more equitable and inclusive for rural students.

6.2.1 Theoretical Implications

As I discussed in Chapter 3 Methodology, I framed this study in poststructuralism in order to uncover and disrupt the hidden conceptual binaries that structure the EFL education in China. The context of EFL education constructed within rural students' narratives of challenge provides a nuanced perspective of binaries and dominances inherent in EFL and ESL education.

The first important implication arises from the finding that the imagined community of wealthy urban elites is recognized as prevalent within rural students' narratives. Several existing studies show that language learner actively construct diverse imagined communities, such as the global community (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007), women's identities (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002) and the community of employed

immigrants (Li & Simpson, 2013). My study, however, finds that to be urban elites through EFL learning is perceived as predominant by rural students.. This dominant way of imagining, as this study reveals, often excludes rural students' beliefs, knowledge, and values, functioning as an exclusionary force in relation to their participating in EFL imagined communities. Therefore, more research attention needs to be paid to the dominant ways of imagining based on perceptions of different language learners in specific contexts of language education. Norton (2010) claims that a primary task of language teaching is to support language learners' development of capacity for imagining a wider range of identities and enhance their ownership of English. The dominance of certain ways of imagining makes it difficult for language learners to develop more diverse communities and identities. In order to develop ELT that works towards students' sense of ownership of the language, more research is recommended to focus on students' constructing of imaginary communities and its relationship to the particular context of language education. Without awareness of the dominance of certain ways of imagining and their exclusionary force imposed on others ways, to support students' construction of diverse identities in language learning will become an empty slogan.

The second implication for theories in ELT is based on the way the poststructural theory of language learner identity is applied to this research. Drawing on the constructs of investment and imagined communities in a poststructural framework combined with a narrative analysis approach, I was able to access nuanced

aspects of EFL education in China that have rarely been seen —the dominance of cosmopolitan culture in textbook cultural contents and oral communicative class activities. Most of the existing studies framed in the poststructural theory of language learner identity focus on language learners' perception of themselves, unfolding the process of students' identity construction-- how students discursively negotiate, mediate and construct identities in the process of language learning (e.g., Hajar, 2017; Lee, 2014; Trent, 2012; Xiao, 2014). The role of human agency is emphasized in the identity construction process. In my study, I focus on the broader context within which language learners try to actively invest in language learning, but meanwhile, face the challenge in doing so. In this broader context, we need to notice that while EFL learners construct their desired imagined community, their constructing is subject to the dominant forces embedded in EFL education. For rural Chinese students who are socially and culturally marginalized, their construction of the EFL imagined community is not necessarily an active and independent process. Rather, their way of imagining is greatly influenced by a series of dominant beliefs, values and ideologies in the EFL education in China, such as the cosmopolitan culture in the textbooks, the pedagogical focus on communicative competence and the instrumentalist language ideology. These dominant forces beyond rural students' control impact their imagining in a covert way, posing a great challenge to rural students in their efforts to participate in the EFL learner community. Language learners do not construct their imagined communities out of nowhere. While we acknowledge the positive role of human

agency in the constructing of identities, we can not ignore the challenge that the disadvantaged EFL learners face. Their desires for and investment in learning the language are subject to the dominant practices, cultures and ideologies embedded in the context they are in. In future research, I recommend that more research attention should be paid to investigate the structural system of particular EFL education—what standards and practices are recognized as privileged. Discovering the dominant beliefs, values and teaching and learning practices will contribute to a better understanding of EFL learners' challenge in constructing their identities in EFL learning.

6.2.2 Pedagogical Implications

Taking a poststructural approach to exploring rural students' challenge in EFL learning, I expected to question the standards and practices that long established in the EFL education in China. In response to this research expectation, the findings of rural students' situated perception and understanding of EFL education problematize the cultural contents of EFL textbooks, the classroom teaching and the recruitment and training of English-speaking teachers in China. These findings provide pedagogical implications in the following respects.

Firstly, the study results show the national EFL coursebook in China today uses a disguised form of cosmopolitan English which fails to engage rural students as confident and respectable EFL learners. It implies that the cultural contents of the textbook that have been viewed as diverse by scholars and authors need to be

reconsidered. In current EFL education shaped within a cross-cultural framework, cultural diversity means cultures of different nations and countries. The socio-cultural perspective can be another useful lens for discovering what cultural realities are excluded from the EFL coursebook. In order to engage learners from rural areas, textbooks need to include contents about rural cultures and values along with rural students' experiences. Canagarajah (1999) mentioned a rural student's wish that the English curriculum could be rooted in the local community and needs, such as mangoes and village huts. Canagarajah (1999) argues,

It is very important to use readings from minority writers and even oral or folk texts from the students' own communities. Such a practice will demonstrate to them that their own cultural capital is valued by the school. This will provide them with the confidence to tap their own linguistic and discursive resources and further develop them. (p.190)

Corbett (2007) shares the above view that education for students in rural communities needs to reinforce their roots and understanding of place. This is not to say that the cosmopolitan contents should be removed from the textbook. Rather, the cultural contents should be inclusive of values and experiences of marginalized social classes. Therefore, besides the contents on international travel and cross-cultural communication, the EFL textbook can involve values, ways of living and thinking, dreams and pursuits, and traditions and customs rooted in the rural culture. Only in doing so can rural students be engaged in investing in the imagined community of

EFL learners.

Secondly, the study suggests that oral-communication activities often pose challenges to rural students in their participation in EFL classes and communities. The findings of this study show that rural students often feel embarrassed about speaking English in such class activities as self-introduction and group discussion. Unable to speak English, these rural students are excluded from EFL class activities. Hidden behind the teaching emphasis on oral communication competence is the driving force of the demand for new economy industries. EFL educators in China need to be aware that this implied message of learning to work in service-related industries in the city may lead to rural students' embarrassment about their lack of language proficiency and self-abasement of their life experiences and rural background. Development of English oral competence indeed adds up to possibilities and opportunities for the prospective employment of rural students. However, in this process, their self-pride and self-confidence in their cultures and values should not be ruined. I suggest reconsidering two aspects in relation to orientation of class activities towards oral communication competence. The first concerns other ways of communication. Cameron (2002) suggests that language teachers should consider which language and what kinds of communications are valuable for developing communication competence rather than taking the oral form in the target language for granted. For the purposes of communication, such pedagogical questions are open to being answered: can students use their mother tongue or a mix of languages they use and learn?

Besides speaking and writing, can some creative forms of communication be integrated into the EFL class, such as acting, drawing and singing? The second aspect is topics of communication which is closely related to the textbook contents. The cultural inclusivity of topics can be improved by involving feelings, experiences and problems shared by students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, such as love, pleasure, anger and failure. Through doing so, opportunities are available for rural students to be engaged in EFL learning due to their experiences, knowledge and culture being acknowledged and respected along with those of other students.

The last pedagogical implication is on the preparation of native speaker teachers to teach Chinese students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds in China. In this study, Yu's story about his foreign teacher's reading assignment shows that not all EFL teachers from English-speaking countries are aware of the impacts of their teaching on students' understanding of themselves and their own cultures. The teaching of native speaker teachers must not intensify the embarrassment and self-abasement of students from socially and culturally disadvantaged areas. Efforts should be made to avoid conveying messages of native-speakerism to students consciously or unconsciously. Phillipson (1999) makes suggestions on a minimum standard for EFL and ESL teachers:

...it would seem to be a minimal requirement of teachers of English as a second or foreign language that they should have proven experience of and success n in foreign language learning, and that they should have a detailed acquaintance

with the language and culture of the learners they are responsible for. (p.195)

He emphasizes that in addition to knowledge about the usage and structure of English, native English speaker teachers need to be familiar with learners' cultures and languages. This criterion is too ideal to accomplish at least at present in China. Only a few native speakers speak Mandarin Chinese and have even basic knowledge about the regional culture. Against the backdrop of high demand for native speaker teachers, some training programs should be set up in China for native speakers who want to teach or are teaching Chinese students. The purpose of the programs is not to make ideal native speaker teachers, but to raise these teachers' awareness of speakerism and its impacts on EFL students, those from rural areas in particular.

Teachers who may previously have identified themselves with a "native speaker" model must now consider that the English which they are teaching, and the way in which it is taught are open to a far wider range of cultural realities which they and their students may bring from their diverse linguistic and cultural environment. (Holliday, 2015, p.22)

It is the open-mindedness of native speakers to diverse non-Western cultures that matters to support rural Chinese students to become confident and respected learners.

6.3 Recommendation for Further Research

Using life story research, I was able to uncover nuanced perspectives of the structural system of EFL education in China based on individual students' partial and

situated understanding. The structural system of EFL education in China is a novel and broad area deserving sufficient research attention in the future. However, since this structural system is invisible and taken for granted, it is comparatively difficult for researchers to detect what is dominant and what is marginalized. Moreover, researchers may not be aware that they are part of this system. Since a fundamental purpose of investigating the structural system of EFL education in China is for the benefit of the learners' from disadvantaged backgrounds, how to attain the learners' lens becomes the key to informing the dominance inherent in EFL education. Language learners' narratives combined with a narrative analysis approach can be drawn upon as a strong conceptual framework for researching this covert structural system of foreign language education.

There is a long way to go to create and promote equity in EFL education in China. EFL education is inherently ideological. EFL education in China prioritizes the language ideology that English is a practical tool for education and employment. The dominance of this ideology imposes exclusionary forces on rural students in their EFL learning unconsciously and covertly. Contrary to the educational goal of empowering rural students, inclusion of rural students in EFL education often sustains the existing inequality. In order to take one step further towards educational equity, more attention should focus on uncovering the subtle hegemonic forces embedded in foreign language education. An inclusive and open mechanism of foreign language education policy making is to be created to involve more ideologies, cultures and values that

have been excluded and disrespected. This is a mission for all EFL researchers and educators in the long run.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Recruitment Poster

English version

Faculty of Education
University of Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH IN

English Learning Experiences of Students from Rural Areas

I am looking for undergraduate students and graduate students who come from rural areas to take part in a study of

Rural students' experience with English learning

As a participant in this study, you would agree to take an interview about your experiences with English learning.

Your total time commitment is approximately 2-3 hours.

If you would like to volunteer for this study, or need more information about this study, please contact:

Cheng Li
PhD Candidate
Faculty of Education
Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada
At
Cell Phone: 13099930517
Email: cheng.li@mun.ca

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have

been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr.chair@mun.ca or by telephone at [709-864-2861](tel:709-864-2861)

Chinese version

加拿大纽芬兰纪念大学教育学院

招募研究参与者

研究课题：农村学生的英语学习经历

我现在正在进行一项关于农村学生英语学习经历的研究。现诚邀来自农村地区的在校本科生和研究生参与此项研究。

作为研究的参与者，你会接受一个有关英语学习经历的一对一访谈。参与时间总计约 2 — 3 个小时。

如有兴趣参与此项研究或需更多查询，请联系

李琤

博士候选人

加拿大纽芬兰纪念大学教育学院

联系方式：

手机：13099930517

电邮：cheng.li@mun.ca

此项研究计划已接受了人文研究伦理委员会的审查，且与纽芬兰大学伦理规则一致。如有任何关于此项研究伦理方面的担忧和疑问，可以联系人文研究伦理委员会主席，联系方式：电邮 icehr.chair@mun.ca 或电话（+1） [709-864-2861](tel:709-864-2861)

Appendix 2 Recruitment Flyer

English version

Faculty of Education
University of Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH IN

English Learning Experiences of Students from Rural Areas

I am looking for undergraduate students and graduate students who come from rural areas to take part in a study of

Rural students' experience with English learning

This research is intended to explore what supports rural EFL learners' needs and how the current EFL education can be reformed accordingly.

As a participant in this study, you would agree to take an interview about your experiences with English learning. In the interview, you will tell your own stories that stand out in your memory of learning.

Your total time commitment is approximately 2-3 hours.

If you would like to volunteer for this study, or need more information about this study, please contact:

Cheng Li
PhD Candidate
Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada
At
Cell Phone: 13099930517
Email: cheng.li@mun.ca

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at aticehr.chair@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Chinese version

加拿大纽芬兰纪念大学教育学院

招募研究参与者

研究课题：农村学生的英语学习经历

我现在正在进行一项关于农村学生英语学习经历的研究。现诚邀**来自农村地区的在校本科生和研究生**参与此项研究。

这项研究旨在探寻来自农村学生在英语学习中需要得到什么支持，以及现在的英语教育应作何相应改革。

作为研究的参与者，你会接受一个有关英语学习经历的一对一访谈。在访谈中，你需要讲述自己英语学习经历中印象最深的故事。

整个参与时间约 2 — 3 个小时。

如有兴趣参与此项研究或需更多查询，请联系

李琤

博士候选人

加拿大纽芬兰纪念大学教育学院

联系方式：

手机：13099930517

电邮：cheng.li@mun.ca

此项研究计划已接受了人文研究伦理委员会的审查，且与纽芬兰大学伦理规则一致。如有任何关于此项研究伦理方面的担忧和疑问，可以联系人文研究伦理委员会主席，联系方式：电邮 icehr.chair@mun.ca 或电话（+ 1 ） [709-864-2861](tel:709-864-2861)。

Appendix 3 Informed Consent Form

English version

Informed Consent Form

Title: *Dreams and Challenges: Chinese rural students' experiences with learning English as a foreign language (EFL)*

Researcher(s): *Cheng Li, Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland, email: cheng.li@mun.ca, cell phone: 13099930517 (in China); 709-740-4395 (in Canada)*

Supervisor(s): *Dr. Xuemei Li, Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland, email: xuemili@mun.ca*

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled “*Dreams and Challenges: Chinese rural students' experiences with learning English as a foreign language (EFL)*.”

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. Please contact the researcher, *Cheng Li*, if you have any questions about the study or would like more information before you consent.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in this research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.

Introduction:

I am a doctoral student of the Faculty of Education. As part of my Doctoral thesis, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Xuemei Li.

Purpose of study:

This research project is intended to understand rural students' aspirations and challenges in learning EFL and explore what supports they need. Results of the study will provide a view of the current EFL education in China from the experiences of rural students and raise awareness of rural learners in practices and theories of EFL education.

What you will do in this study:

Participants will agree to take a face-to-face interview about their experiences with English learning. They are going to tell stories of dreams and challenges in their English learning.

Length of time:

The total time commitment required to participate will be 2-3 hours for completing the interview.

Withdrawal from the study:

- *Participants have the right to withdraw at any time during the period of data collection, translation, and verification. When withdrawing from the study, the participant should let the researcher know that he/she wishes to withdraw. The data collected up to that point will be destroyed and excluded from any analysis.*
- *Withdrawal of participation doesn't lead to any negative consequences. The participant is not required to provide reasons.*
- *Withdrawal of data is no longer possible when data analysis starts. Participants will be asked to verify the translation of interview transcripts prior to the data being analyzed. Withdrawal of data is no longer possible after participants sign the verification.*

Possible benefits:

- a) *Participation in the study provides participants with chances to express their opinions and make their voices by the way of telling their own stories and experiences of English learning. The community of EFL learners from rural China will benefit from their participation too. Their participation will spread rural students' standpoints and perspectives to a wider range of audience and raise more social awareness of the rural EFL learners.*
- b) *Researchers, professors and teachers in the field of foreign language education may take a refreshed view of EFL education by understanding rural students' perspectives. The theories and practices of foreign language education will be enriched with participants' experiences with EFL learning.*

Possible risks:

When telling stories about difficulties, challenges and frustrations, light emotional discomfort might occur. In most conditions, no serious risks and discomforts are anticipated. Should strong or extreme emotions appear, I am going to suspend the interview immediately and refer participants to counseling service.

Confidentiality:

The ethical duty of confidentiality includes safeguarding participants' identities, personal information, and data from unauthorized access, use, or disclosure.

I will try all the means to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality and avoid exposing the participants to the risk of identification in any dissemination of research results. Only the research team will have access to information that identifies the participants to carry out this research study. The identifying information will not be shared with others outside this research study. The data in paper forms will be stored in a locked cabinet not accessible to anyone outside the study. Data in digital forms will be encrypted and password protected.

A limitation on confidentiality is mandatory reporting. Researchers are required, by law, to report to the proper authorities harm or abuse or other situations that require reporting.

Anonymity:

Anonymity refers to protecting participants' identifying characteristics, such as name or description of physical appearance.

The information in this study will be used only for research purposes and in ways that will not reveal who you are. Direct and indirect identifiers such as participants' names and contact information will be removed from the data collected from the study, and are never linked to other information about the participants. You will not be identified in any publication from this study.

When the data used is particularly dramatic and extreme events, the participant might be identified by a few people who are familiar with him/her. Another possibility is that participants may have consented to being identified, or revealed to others about their participation in the study.

Every reasonable effort will be made to ensure data anonymity; and participants will not be identified in publications without their explicit permission.

Recording of Data:

Audio recording will be used in the study. A digital recorder is used to record each interview. Please indicate your agreement or not. Please see yes/no checkboxes (at the end of this form) to indicate agreement, or not, to the use of digital recorder.

Storage of Data:

Participants' contact information such as names, email addresses and telephone numbers will be stored in hard copy away from other information in a locked cabinet. Hard copies of consent forms will be kept in a locked cabinet separately in a locked filing cabinet. The audio files of interviews will be stored on a hard drive encrypted with the password protected.

I am the only person who has access to all the information and original data mentioned above. Data will be kept for a minimum of five years, as required by Memorial University's policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research. After being kept for 5 years, all the hard copies and e-copies of data will be destroyed permanently. The hard copy of raw data will be shredded, and e-copy deleted.

Reporting of Results:

- The data will be published in my doctoral dissertation. It will potentially be presented at conferences or published in an academic journal. Copies of the dissertation will be publically available in at the QEII library.*
- The data will be reported by using direct quotations, short stories or excerpts from interviews. No personally identifying information will be used.*

Sharing of Results with Participants:

A summary of findings will be available to all participants after the project is complete. The results from this study will be presented at conferences or/and in academic journals. Copies of the thesis will be available in the university library and e-copies may be available online. The participants can also access the study results by searching my name and keywords of the project on the internet.

Questions:

Potential participants should be given the opportunity to ask questions and receive answers to their questions prior to giving their consent.

You are welcome to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact:

Cheng Li

Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland

Cell Phone: 13099930517 (in China)

Email: cheng.li@mun.ca

Supervisor's information: Dr. Xuemei Li, Email: xuemei.li@mun.ca

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Consent:

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw participation in the study without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- You understand that if you choose to end participation during data collection, any data collected from you up to that point will be destroyed.
- You understand that if you choose to withdraw after data collection has ended, your data can be removed from the study up to *the date when you sign the verification of the English translation of interview transcripts*.

I agree to be audio-recorded

☐ Yes ☐ No

I agree to the use of direct quotations

☐ Yes ☐ No

By signing this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

Your signature confirms:

- ☐ I have read what this study is about and understood the risks and benefits. I have had adequate time to think about this and had the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered.
- ☐ I agree to participate in the research project understanding the risks and contributions of my participation, that my participation is voluntary, and that I may end my participation.

☐ A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

Signature of participant

Date

Researcher's Signature:

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

Chinese version

知情同意书

题目: *梦想与挑战: 中国农村学生英语学习经历*

研究者: *李琤, 纽芬兰纪念大学教育学院, 电邮 cheng.li@mun.ca, 电话: 13099930517 (中国); 709-740-4395 (加拿大)*

导师: *李雪梅博士, 纽芬兰纪念大学教育学院, 电邮: xuemili@mun.ca*

您将被邀请参加一项名为“*梦想与挑战: 中国农村学生英语学习经历*”的研究。

本知情同意书提供给您一些基本信息, 帮助您了解该项研究, 参与研究的相关事项, 还有退出参与研究的权利。在您决定是否参加这项研究之前, 请充分了解参加研究后可能给您带来的益处、风险和不适。请您仔细阅读并理解知情同意书所提供的信息, 如有任何疑问如有任何相关问题和咨询, 请联系李琤。

是否参与此项研究, 决定权完全在你。如果参与后改变主意或者中途退出, 都不会对你产生任何不利后果。

简介:

我是纽芬兰纪念大学教育学院的博士生。此项研究是我博士论文的一部分，导师是李雪梅博士。

研究主旨:

此项研究旨在了解农村学生的英语经历和相关的梦想与挑战，探求他们学习中所需的帮助和支持。研究的结果将展示农村学生视角下的中国英语教育，并且希望引起英语教育和研究领域对农村学生的关注。

你需要做的事:

参与者将接受一次有关英语学习经历的一对一访谈，讲述自己英语学习的经历以及其中的梦想与挑战。

参与时间长度:

参与时间总计约 2 — 3 小时，用于完成访谈。

退出参与该项研究:

- 参与者有权在数据收集、翻译、验证阶段的任何时候退出研究。退出时，请向研究者表达您退出的意愿。如果您退出，所收集的数据将会销毁，不会用于任何的分析研究。
- 您的退出不会导致任何不良后果，您也无须提供退出的理由。
- 数据分析开始后，参与者将不能撤回所提供的数据。数据分析开始前，参与者需要验证访谈文本的英语翻译。参与者签署确认英译件后，所提供的数据就不能再退出研究。

可能的益处:

- c) 参与者通过讲述自己英语学习的故事和经历，有机会表达自己观点和想法。通过参与研究，参与者的立场和观点将传递给更广阔的人群，引起社会、教育和文化领域对农村学生的关注，并在英语教育的实践和理论中得以体现。您的参与将有利与整个农村英语学习者的群体。
- d) 参与者提供的观点和意见能为从事外语教育的科研人员，大学教授以及教师们展示一个全新的视角下的英语教育。外语教育理论也会因为加入了这些参与者学习经历的启示而更加丰富。

可能的风险:

在讲述有关困境、挑战和挫折的经历时，可能会产生轻微的情绪不适。不过大多数情况下，

不会发生严重的风险和情绪不适。

个人信息和记录的保密：

保密的伦理职责包括对参与者身份、个人信息、数据严格保密。

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数据记录：

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我是唯一能接触以上原始信息和数据的人。根据纽芬兰近大学学术研究政策，数据将保存至少 5 年。5 年后，所有纸质和电子数据将永久销毁。

研究结果报告：

- 数据将在我的博士论文中发表。研究结果还有可能在学术会议和学术刊物中发表。

QELI 图书馆将为公众提供论文的借阅。

- 在研究报告中，将会直接引用您的访谈内容、转述您的故事或节选访谈片段，但不会使用任何可以辨识您身份的个人信息。

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问题:

有意愿参与研究的人员可以提出问题，并且在得到回答再签署同意书。

欢迎您在参与此项研究之前、之后和参与过程中提出您的疑问。如需更多项目相关信息，请联系:

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此研究项目以获得纪念大学人文研究伦理委员会的批准，符合纪念大学研究伦理政策。如果您对这项研究仍有伦理方面的顾虑，比如您被对待的方式和作为参与者的权利，您可以与伦理委员会的主席联系，联系方式: 电邮 icehr@mun.ca 或电话 (001) 709-864-2861。

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我同意对访谈进行录音

☐ 是 ☐ 否

我同意直接引用访谈内容

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- ☐ 我将获得一份知情同意书的副本

参与者签名

日期

研究者签名：

我已尽最大之努力对此项研究进行了介绍和解释。欢迎参与者提出问题，我乐意解答。我相信参与者已充分知晓参与研究需要做的事情和可能出现的风险，参与此项目完全出于他/她的自愿。

主要研究者签名

日期

Appendix 4 Interview Questions

English version

Interview questions

Part 1. Overall summary

1. Think about your experience with learning English as if it were a book or novel. What main chapters might be contained in this book on your experience? What are their titles?
2. Can you give a brief description of those main chapters?

Part 2. Particular scenes standing out in their past experiences

3. Can you describe a scene in your learning experience that stands out as an especially positive experience, or else an especially happy, joyous, exciting, or wonderful moment related to learning English? What happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Why you think this particular moment was so good?
4. Please identify a scene that stands out as a low point in your experience with English learning. What happened in the event, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Why you think this particular moment was so bad?
5. Please identify a particular episode in your learning experience that stands out as turning point-- episodes that marked an important change in you or your story. What happened, where and when, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling? What do you think this event says about you?

Part 3. On aspirations and future

6. What do you think is going to come next in your learning story?
7. What are your plans and dreams for the future about English learning? What do you hope to accomplish in the future in your learning English?

Part 4. On challenges, losses and struggles

8. Looking back over your English learning journey, please identify and describe what you now consider to be the greatest challenge you have faced in learning. What is or was the challenge or problem? How did it develop? How did you address or deal with this challenge or problem? What is the significance of this challenge or problem in your learning?

Part 5. Reflections on the experiences

9. Looking back over your EFL learning journey, what do you think is the greatest failure or regret you have experienced? How have you coped with this failure or regret? What effect has this failure had on you and your English learning?
10. Looking back over your entire life story with all its chapters, scenes, and challenges, and extending back into the past and ahead into the future, what do you think is a central theme, message, or idea that runs throughout the story? What is the major theme in your life story?

Chinese version

访谈问题

第一部分 概要

1. 假设您的英语学习经历是一本书或一部小说，这本书会有哪几个主要章节？分别会取什么标题？
2. 你能简单描述下这些主要的章节吗？

第二部分 过去经历中印象深刻的场景

3. 你能描述下学习经历中印象深刻的一个积极愉快的场景吗？或者一个感到特别幸福、快乐、激动或者精彩的时刻？发生了什么事？时间、地点、人物分别是什么？你对这一时刻的想法和感受是什么？为什么觉得这个时刻那么好？
4. 请描述一个在你记忆中学习英语所经历的一个消沉的事情。发生了什么事？在哪儿、什么时候发生的？都有什么人出现？你想法和感受是什么？为什么觉得这个事情那么糟糕？
5. 请想想看，在你的学习经历中，有哪件事成为你英语学习的一个转折点，标志着你的重要变化？发生了什么事？在哪儿、什么时候发生的？都有什么人出现？你的想法和感受是什么？

第三部分 梦想与未来

6. 你认为在接下来的英语学习中，可能会发生怎样的故事？
7. 你对将来的英语学习有什么计划和憧憬？你希望通过英语学习收获到什么？

第四部分 挑战、失败与奋斗

8. 回顾过去的英语学习经历，请描述一下你面临过的最大的挑战。这个挑战究竟是什么？它是怎样发展成为一个难题的？你是如何来处理 and 解决这个问题的呢？这个挑战在你英语学习中起到了怎样的作用和影响？

第五部分 经历的反思

9. 回顾过去的英语学习经历，你认为经历过的最大失败或遗憾是什么？你是如何面对这个失败和遗憾的？这次失败对你的英语学习产生了什么影响？
10. 如果回想你的整个学习经历，包括所有的章节、场景和挑战，再延伸到未来，请说出一个能贯穿所有故事的中心主题或思想。你故事的主题是什么？