



In-Class Expectations Versus Realities: Chinese International ELLs' Experiences in a Public University ESL Classroom

The following is a qualitative study on Chinese international English language learners' (ELLs') experiences in an English as a second language (ESL) classroom. Set at Sunset University (pseudonym used), a public university in Northern California, the study uses ethnographic field methods to gauge information about an ESL teacher's and Chinese international ELLs' views about effective teaching in the public university ESL classroom. The author draws upon previous studies (McCargar, 1993; Peacock, 2001; Reid, 1987; Sawyer, 1995; Schulz, 1996) to explore whether there may be a mismatch between Chinese international ELLs' and the ESL teachers' expectations about effective teaching, and she further explores whether the existence of such a mismatch might be correlated with Chinese international ELLs' disengagement in this setting. The author discovers the presence of mismatch in 3 areas: (a) structure, (b) scaffolding, and (c) group work, all 3 of which have implications for Chinese international ELLs' (dis)engagement in the public university ESL context.

Access to effective language instruction for English language learners (ELLs) in the US is becoming more and more crucial, especially in light of the “dizzying demographic change” (McKay & Wong, 1996, p. 580) that the US educational system has undergone during the past several decades. This change has contributed to a significant number of international students increasingly making their way to higher education institutions nationwide since 1975, a trend consistent with a significant growth in international student enrollment at the global level during this same period. For example, the number of international students worldwide rose from 0.6 million in 1975 to 3.3 million in 2008, and the US played a pivotal role in this increase. Specifically, by 2008 the number of international students

enrolled in US higher education institutions comprised 19% of the world's total number of international students—a higher percentage than that held by any other G-8 country in that year (Miller & Warren, 2011).¹

During the current decade, international students have particularly affected US colleges and universities, rising to a “record high” (Witherell & Clayton, 2014) in 2014 in comparison to previous years. In fact, during the 2013-2014 academic year (a year before this study was conducted), Witherell and Clayton (2014) found that the number of international college and university students within the US rose by 8% as compared to the previous year, totaling 886,052 international students during that year. Specific states, as well as specific universities within the US, have witnessed an even steeper increase than the national average during this period. For example, at a Northern California public university called Sunset University (pseudonym used), the number of international students increased by *more than three times* the national average rate during the 2013-2014 academic year.

In considering this snapshot of international student enrollment, it is worth noting the role played by Chinese international students within it—and, particularly, by Chinese international undergraduate students. Yan and Berliner (2011) reveal, for instance, that Chinese international students “constitute one of the largest groups” (p. 523) of students attending US universities. The Institute of International Education supports and extends these findings, revealing that the growth in international student enrollment in the US during the 2013-2014 academic year was “once again largely driven by students from China, particularly at the undergraduate level” (Witherell & Clayton, 2014). Specifically, the institute found that the number of Chinese international students enrolled in US secondary institutions “increased by 17 percent in total ... and increased by 18 percent at the undergraduate level” (Witherell & Clayton, 2014) during that year. Given the recent growth in Chinese international undergraduate student enrollment at US universities, I have chosen to follow one English as a second language (ESL) teacher and two Chinese international ELLs who attended an intermediate ESL class (ESL 2, pseudonym used) at Sunset University, a large public university in Northern California. I focus on these students' expectations about what constitutes effective teaching in the ESL classroom, as well as how these expectations measure up against the ESL teacher's actual teaching practices.

Although much research has been conducted (both in the US and internationally) on the mismatch between ELLs' teaching expectations versus ESL teachers' *preferred* teaching methodologies (McCargar, 1993; Peacock, 2001; Reid, 1987; Sawyer, 1995; Schulz, 1996), few studies have obtained observational data on ESL teachers' actual teaching *practices*; instead, they have largely focused on interview-based data, centering on ESL teachers' *theories* about teaching, rather than practice. Since an educator's teaching preferences may likely deviate from his or her teaching practices (Samu-

elowicz & Bain, 1992), my study fills an important gap in the literature on teaching practice expectations. Furthermore, few studies have gathered data on Chinese international ELLs' expectations about effective teaching within the US public university ESL context, and little has been researched on the question of how a potential mismatch between Chinese international ELLs' expectations about effective teaching versus an ESL teacher's actual teaching practices may go on to affect Chinese international ELLs' *engagement* within the ESL classroom.

To sum up, given the emerging population of Chinese international undergraduate ELLs in the US more broadly (Miller & Warren, 2011; Witherell & Clayton, 2014), within Sunset University more specifically (ESL course instructor, personal communication, December 2014), and in light of the significant tuition money that these students invest in the US public university education system, this study will yield important information about how Sunset University (and public universities similar to it) can best cater to this emerging population. Specifically, this study will be important for ESL teachers at Sunset University, professional-development coordinators implementing new programs for these teachers, and curriculum planners of the ESL series at Sunset University.

While perhaps not generalizable to the US as a whole, studies such as this one begin to yield valuable information about the gap between Chinese international ELLs' *expectations* about effective ESL teaching on the one hand, and ESL teachers' actual teaching *practices* in the classroom on the other. Ideally, this study will contribute to the existing research base that has focused on the question of how to better match ESL teachers' teaching practices to ELLs' expectations about effective ESL teaching within the classroom context. My research questions follow:

1. Do Chinese international ELLs in the public university ESL classroom experience a mismatch between their expectations about effective teaching and the teachers' actual teaching practices? If so, in what ways?
2. How does this mismatch in Chinese international ELLs' expectations about effective teaching versus teachers' actual teaching practices impact Chinese international ELLs' engagement in the public university ESL classroom, if at all?

Theoretical and Empirical Background

ELLs' Expectations About Effective Teaching

Within the existing research base on ELLs' expectations about effective ESL teaching practice, previous authors have found that the existence of a mismatch between ELL students' and ESL teachers' expectations about effective teaching have led to negative learning outcomes for ELLs, such as ques-

tioning of the teacher's authority (Schulz, 1996), as well as resistance, dissatisfaction, and demotivation (McCargar, 1993). More specifically, Schulz (1996) has argued that most ELLs not only expect to receive corrective feedback from their teachers on written course work, but that they may also "consciously or subconsciously question the credibility of the teacher and/or the instructional approach" (Schulz, 1996, p. 349) if this expectation remains unmet. Furthermore, McCargar (1993) has suggested that when teachers remain unaware of ELLs' role expectations and do not adjust to them, they "risk ... having students withdraw or be unhappy" (p. 200). Finally, McCargar (1993) also found that ELLs not only "expected a more teacher-oriented environment" (p. 200) within the ESL classroom than teachers did, but that they also preferred more error correction than their teachers did, a finding supported by Schulz (1996) as well. It is important to note that Samuelowicz and Bain (1992) have identified an additional, potential layer to consider when conducting teaching practice-oriented research. Specifically, Samuelowicz and Bain (1992) have found that there is often a gap between teachers' expressed teaching *preferences* versus their actual teaching *practices*, an argument I touched upon earlier and that I expand upon in a later section.

Learning Style Theories

One way of viewing the gap between ELLs' expectations about effective teaching and teachers' actual teaching practices is through the lens of learning style theory. Dunn (1984) defines learning style as "the way in which each person absorbs and retains information and/or skills" (p. 12). This conception of learning style draws upon a strand of theory initiated by Dunn and Dunn (1978), who originally suggested that learning styles help describe "how each [student] learns" (p. 5); for example, a student might learn visually, kinesthetically, and so forth. Teaching styles, on the other hand, can be defined as the "natural, habitual, and preferred way(s) of teaching new information and skills in the classroom" (Peacock, 2001, p. 7). A popular hypothesis in favor of "matching" (Reid, 1987, p. 99), which I further deconstruct throughout this section, suggests that matching a teacher's teaching style to students' learning styles positively affects students' learning outcomes (Dunn, 1984; Dunn & Dunn, 1978; Reid, 1995).

While Reid (1987) pioneered learning style theory as it relates to ELLs, Peacock (2001) and Sawyer (1995) helped support and extend the theory of matching in such a way as to suggest that ELLs might, in fact, have specific *expectations* about what effective teaching entails. As alluded to earlier, Peacock (2001) supports Reid's (1987) theory that a mismatch between ELLs' learning styles and their teacher's teaching style leads to "difficulty in learning class material, high frustration levels, and even failure" (Reid, 1987, p. 91) among ELLs. More specifically, however, Peacock (2001) found that the

Chinese students in his sample repeatedly gave the following feedback about the mismatch between their learning styles and the teacher's teaching style:

that they felt very frustrated or uncomfortable; lost interest in the lesson and paid less attention; found it harder to concentrate, could not follow the lesson, or found it "very" stressful; got bored and did not learn as much; or wanted to give up. (p. 12)

Notably, such descriptors are clear indicators of demotivation and disengagement. To this end, Peacock's (2001) interview findings might have implications about ELLs' beliefs about effective teaching as well, because of the fact that ELLs' boredom, lack of motivation, and frustration could be rooted in ELLs' expectations that they be taught, instead, in the ways that they believe to be most effective. Still, such a presumption needs to be assessed with caution because of the fact that Peacock's (2001) interview and survey questions were somewhat leading (e.g., "Have you ever felt unhappy or frustrated in class because your teacher's teaching style was different to your learning style?" [Peacock, 2001, p. 8]). Nevertheless, additional authors (McCargar, 1993; Sawyer, 1995) have proposed findings similar to Peacock's (2001), a fact that I explore further in a later section.

In order to be able to empirically assess mismatch, Peacock (2001) also more specifically compared and contrasted Chinese ELLs' learning style preferences with ESL teachers' teaching style preferences. Based on these findings, Peacock (2001) suggested that there is a mismatch between Chinese ELLs' strong dislike of group learning on the one hand, and ESL teachers' strong preference for group learning on the other. Furthermore, Peacock (2001) posited that there is a mismatch between Chinese ELLs' strong preference for auditory learning on the one hand, and Western ESL teachers' strong dislike of auditory learning on the other. Finally, Peacock (2001) also extended prior research by providing empirical, survey-based evidence in support of Reid's (1987) theory that "a mismatch between teaching and learning styles causes learning failure, frustration, and demotivation" (p. 2) among ELLs.

Mismatch Between ELLs' and ESL Instructors' Teaching Expectations

Notably, previous authors have proposed findings that either further inform (McCargar, 1993; Samuelowicz & Bain, 1992) or challenge (Sawyer, 1995) Peacock's (2001) discovery about ELLs' mismatch-based frustration. For instance, a state university professor in Missouri revealed to Sawyer (1995) that many of the students in the instructor's class had poor study skills, performed poorly on exams, and exhibited "tension toward the instructor" (p. 86), a fact that sparked Sawyer (1995) to initiate a learning style

investigation to see whether there was a mismatch between students' learning styles and the professor's teaching style in the class. Surprisingly, however, when Sawyer (1995) administered learning style surveys to the university class, he found that about 70% of students in the professor's class matched their professor's strong preference for *structure*, a category of learning defined by Dunn and Dunn (1978) as "the establishment of specific rules for working on and completing an assignment" (p. 11).

It is important to note that Samuelowicz and Bain's (1992) study may shed light on why Sawyer's (1995) findings seem inconsistent with those of previous authors (Peacock, 2001; Reid, 1995). Specifically, Samuelowicz and Bain (1992) have suggested that teachers' *preferred* ways of teaching (in this case, the teaching-style preference for structure) may not match their actual teaching *practices*. To this end, Samuelowicz and Bain (1992) suggest that there might be a distinction between teachers' "'ideal' conception of teaching" (p. 110) versus their "'working' conception of teaching" (p. 110), such that teachers express their ideal conceptions of teaching to their students, while their working conception of teaching is reflected in their actual teaching practices and is limited by "teacher, student, and institution-related [factors]" (p. 110).

To this end, Samuelowicz and Bain's (1992) findings may inform our understanding of Sawyer's (1995) findings, by revealing that a professor's self-reported preference for structure might in fact differ from his or her actual teaching *practices*, with regards to incorporating structure into the classroom. This implies that the student frustration found by Sawyer (1995) might be the result of a mismatch between students' expectations about effective teaching versus the professor's actual teaching *practices*, and not necessarily a mismatch between the students' preferred learning styles versus the professor's teaching style *preferences* (which are self-reported, and thus potentially inconsistent with one's teaching practices). To this end, Samuelowicz and Bain's (1992) findings bring to light a limitation of learning style theory's exclusively survey- and interview-based methods.

Method

Site and Sample

Sunset University. Although data on the recent increase in Chinese international students at Sunset University are not publicly available, my conversations with an ESL course instructor at Sunset University revealed that the majority of students enrolled in the university's ESL course series originate from East Asia. More specifically, Chinese students comprised the majority of students enrolled in the section I observed for this study. To this end, and in light of the significant increase in the composition of Chinese international students within many US higher education institutions more

broadly, I have chosen to focus this study on several Chinese international ELL students enrolled in an ESL class at Sunset University, ESL 2.

ESL 2. My site was an ESL classroom at a large public university in Northern California called Sunset University (pseudonym used). The course, English as Second Language 2 (ESL 2) or “Intermediate ESL Writing,” is the second in a three-part series that exists in order for ELLs, as well as international students with a failing English Language Test (ELT, pseudonym used) score, to be able to complete the first part of their entry-level writing requirement at Sunset University (after the three-part series, one additional course is required of them). Incoming students who are required to complete this entry-level writing requirement, including international students, are required to take an English Language Assessment (ELA, pseudonym used) at the beginning of their time at Sunset University in order to be further placed into one of these four entry-level writing courses. Upon completion of this requirement, students are allowed to proceed to courses that fulfill their General Education requirements, along with the rest of the university’s undergraduate population. To this end, international students often end up having to enroll in additional course work that native English speakers are not required to enroll in. This is often incredibly taxing on their academic schedules.

International Learners. The classroom in which I conducted my observations consisted of one US-born native English-speaking female instructor and 18 ELLs, all of whom were freshmen and the majority of whom were Chinese male students. Korean male students comprised the second-largest population of students in my sample, and the sample included four female students in total, whose ethnic identities remain unrevealed because of anonymity concerns. My observation sample initially consisted of two Chinese international male ELL students and one Korean international male ELL student, all of whom for the first part of the course worked together as part of a small writing group. However, because of the limited time frame of my study, I have chosen to focus primarily upon the two Chinese international male ELL students here. Both of these students, whose names were Peter and Russell (pseudonyms used), had attended high school in China and were freshmen at Sunset University. Last, my interview sample consisted of one of the international Chinese ELLs in the writing group, specifically Russell, and I also interviewed the ESL course instructor.

Data Collection

Process. My data collection strategies included classroom observations, semistructured interviews, and informal conversations with the ESL course instructor and the students I observed. I observed the ESL 2 course over the duration of one quarter, specifically Winter Quarter 2015, and I con-

ducted two interviews during and after that quarter: one with a Chinese international ELL student (Russell) and one with the ESL course instructor. Furthermore, I observed ESL 2 for a total of eight two-hour class periods over a period of 10 weeks, toward the end of which I conducted my student interview. My follow-up interview with the ESL course instructor took place during April of Spring Quarter 2015, about a month after the completion of the ESL 2 winter course. In terms of interview length, my interview with Russell lasted approximately 45 minutes, whereas my interview with the ESL course instructor lasted just over an hour.

I selected the exact ESL 2 section I observed based on convenience; to be specific, a mutual friend introduced me to the Sunset University ESL instructor via email. Furthermore, I selected my classroom observation sample (i.e., the international students who were part of the small writing group) based on convenience and the fact that I began noticing interesting patterns while observing these students during class (this was within the first several weeks of the quarter). Finally, my student interviewee was also chosen based on convenience, as I drew upon an existing connection with a student I had been observing during my in-class observations.

Instruments. I typed my observational notes on my laptop and recorded my interviews on my phone. I then transcribed my interviews into a Word document (within two months of their completion).

Data Analysis

Qualitative Methods. My qualitative methods included typing up my ethnographic field notes during my classroom observations; typing up my interview notes during my interviews; voice-recording my interviewees; carrying out detailed, word-for-word interview transcription; and creating preliminary codes to categorize my data (secondary and axial codes are pending). As mentioned earlier, Samuelowicz and Bain (1992) suggest that teachers' expressed teaching *preferences* often differ from their actual teaching *practices*, a distinction that often remains unaddressed in interview- and/or survey-based studies on mismatch. It is important to note that I attempt to address this discrepancy by triangulating my interview data on the ESL teacher's expressed teaching *preferences* with my in-class observations of her actual teaching *practices* within my findings.

Codes and Coding Procedures. I created preliminary codes based on patterns I had been noticing during my classroom observations of the university ESL classroom. I plan to recode my data (pending) to include broader categories or themes I notice in my classroom observational data and interviews; finally, I also plan to create axial codes (pending) to capture the most prevalent, larger categories or themes relevant to my classroom observational data and interviews. My preliminary codes included the following: instances of student engagement; instances of student disengagement;

instances of student agency use; lack of student agency; challenges to/questioning of class curriculum and structure; instances of student frustration; instances of students' needing validation from the teacher; and instances of students needing validation from each other. Again, these codes reflect initial patterns I began noticing in my classroom observational data. My secondary and axial codes are pending.

Findings

Consistent with the findings of previous authors (McCargar, 1993; Peacock, 2001; Sawyer, 1995; Schulz, 1996), the ESL instructor and the Chinese international ELLs in my sample had differing expectations about what effective teaching entailed. The following sections, which illustrate these differences in expectation, suggest that the ESL teacher and the Chinese international ELLs in my sample held divergent, or mismatched, expectations about effective teaching in reference to: (a) structure, (b) scaffolding, and (c) group work. The following sections discuss how these areas of mismatch were expressed within the public university ESL classroom, as well as how the mismatch affected Chinese international ELLs' engagement with the class material.

Mismatch and Disengagement in the Public University ESL Classroom

Expectations About Structure and Scaffolding. Consistent with the findings of Sawyer (1995), the students in my sample portrayed a strong expectation that the class be structured. With an eye to Dunn and Dunn's (1978) definition of structure, or "the establishment of specific rules for working on and completing an assignment" (p. 11), it is worth noting that I observed several instances when lack of structure seemed to be linked to student disengagement in the ESL classroom. For example, on January 27 of 2015, I witnessed the students in my sample resist participating in a peer-editing workshop activity with each other. Specifically, the students in the class were instructed to email copies of their essay rough drafts to each other and then read each other's papers aloud to one another. As each student listened to his paper being read aloud to him by a group partner, that student was supposed to highlight his grammar mistakes on his own paper, as well as ask for critical peer feedback from his group members at the end.

At the start of the assignment, I observed a student by the name of Peter exhibiting a lack of readiness to listen to his paper being read aloud to him, so I turned to him to reexplain the procedure that the teacher had in mind for the activity. When I finished my explanation, however, Peter exclaimed, "That's stupid! I thought they should be marking my errors! [He pointed to his group members.] You really think that will work?" At that point, he looked around at his group members, who shrugged. Notably, Peter went on to suggest his own theory about how international students

should learn: “There is some study, about international students, that the best way for them to learn is reading.” Though Peter did eventually participate in the peer-editing workshop, toward the end of class he followed up with the teacher to let her know that “[American] students learn this way. International students don’t learn this way.”

Before continuing, it is important to note that the peer-editing workshop was unstructured in Dunn and Dunn’s (1978) sense of the word. For example, there was no written guideline or error correction key for students to follow as they peer-corrected each other’s papers. Furthermore, the teacher’s oral instructions for the rules of the activity were flexible and could at times be adjusted from group to group, rather than encompassing a one-size-fits all, structured approach. Such a lack of structure or guidance might very well have left the students in my sample, including Peter, at a loss for how to correct their written work. A few additional examples serve to shed light on why Peter’s disengagement during the peer-editing workshop might have stemmed from the lack of structure that encompassed it.

To be specific, when Peter and Russell worked together to correct their written in-class work *using* an error correction key just a week earlier on January 22, both of them were fully engaged as they conversed together in Chinese about their error corrections and as Russell double-checked these corrections using a Chinese dictionary online. It is important that the presence of an error correction key during this earlier activity provided the students’ group work with a layer of structure, if we use Dunn and Dunn’s (1978) definition. Additionally, both the presence of an error correction key *and* the students’ freedom and ability to explore unknown words together in Chinese provided another layer of *scaffolding* (a concept I develop further at the end of the section) for Peter and Russell, potentially causing these students’ increased engagement during the activity.

Finally, during my February 16 one-on-one interview with Peter’s group partner Russell, he expressed the following opinion about the peer-editing workshop’s structure:

[W]e [the group members] are on the same level, so it is hard to judge each other’s ability. Maybe you as a grad student can see, but it’s hard for us. ... I think the teacher’s advising of the whole article should maybe be put first. Have teacher give advice first, and then we can listen to advice from peers and have the ability to solve this problem.

It is important that Russell’s claim that it is “hard” for peers who are on the same level [of English fluency] to note each other’s errors was extended by an in-class comment made by Russell’s third group partner, Fai (who was otherwise excluded from my sample because he was not a Chinese international ELL). Specifically, after the peer-editing workshop, Fai noted that

it was hard for him to find the errors in his paper by hearing his paper read aloud to him by his peers, because that was “no different than if he had read the paper to himself.”

Along those lines, both Russell’s and Fai’s comments align with previous authors’ findings about ELLs’ in-class expectations about structure. For instance, Russell’s need for written corrective feedback falls in line with Schulz’s (1996) finding that ELLs have a strong expectation that their ESL teachers should correct their written errors. In addition, it also resonates with Dunn and Dunn’s (1978) notion of structure because Russell is seeking corrective feedback from the teacher as a means of obtaining access to the “specific rules” (p. 11) of grammar that might guide his group’s peer editing and thus might also structure or inform its peer-editing process. Also, it is possible that Fai expected this type of guidance during the peer-editing workshop as well, given his comparison of the group work process as yielding the *same* opportunities as independent work might yield.

Finally, Russell’s expressed need for attaining corrective feedback from the teacher *before* the peer-editing workshop might also be viewed as Chinese international ELLs’ preference for scaffolding, which is the notion that a teacher should provide just enough structure to get students started and then slowly release initiative of learning to the students as the quarter or semester progresses. A final example, then, of students’ need for structure and/or scaffolding is highlighted through a response Russell provided me during my one-on-one interview with him:

Višnja: Within your writing group, do you feel that the way you wanted to do things was understood, and that people were ... on the same page about how to do things...? Did you have an understanding of how the group should work?

Russell: Yeah, I think we maybe have different ideas about that, so ... But actions [*sic*] we actually did ... I don’t know, but ... it seems like, maybe ... the teacher should ... just give more *leading* of the—how to ... like, the group works—how, actually, it works. ... I do think there are still a little bit details [that] should be [explained] ... maybe a little bit of judgment of the details of the group working together.

In the above example, Russell’s expression of his desire that the teacher lay down or “establish ... specific rules” (Dunn, 1978, p. 11) regarding how group work should function is strikingly obvious. Such a desire for structure, when considered in conjunction with Russell’s and Fai’s earlier comments as well as Peter’s frustration with the unstructured peer-editing activity, supports the finding that the Chinese international ELLs in my sample held a preference for structure and scaffolding overall (and further suggests

that this finding may even extend to Fai, the Korean international ELL in my sample). Such a discovery is also in line with the findings of Sawyer (1995), whose interviews with undergraduate college students revealed that these students strongly desired structure.

Expectations About Group Work

In contrast to the Chinese international ELLs in my sample, the ESL teacher drew upon a different set of expectations about effective teaching, one consistent with McCargar's (1993) finding that ESL teachers expected a less "teacher-oriented environment" (p. 200) than did ELLs in their classroom, as well as with Peacock's (2001) finding that ESL teachers held a strong preference for group learning. To this end, during my in-person interview with the ESL teacher on April 28 of 2015, she suggested that—in contrast to the hierarchical, teacher-centered model of teaching that friends of hers who had taught in East Asian countries (e.g., China, Korea, and Japan) had experienced as the dominant teaching style in those areas—she herself had experience with (and tended to draw upon) a more learner-centered pedagogical approach:

[M]y philosophy is more of a dialogic process of learning, and that ... the situation itself and the students and everything that they bring into it, is a big part of what they learn ... which is ... really common, I think, in a lot of Composition ... and English classes ... maybe in the last 20 years of composition studies, and in ESL teaching practices. ... [Students] learn from each other, rather than just from the teacher, [and] rather than just a top-down approach. ... That's why I think a lot of ESL classrooms have group work, [or] that sort of activity incorporated into the—what you said, the structure. ... Through the process, [and] the ... negotiation of meaning ... there's *learning* going on in that.

As this excerpt from my in-person interview with the ESL teacher reveals, her instruction draws upon a teaching approach, or pedagogical framework, that seems to be common in the area of ESL teaching in recent years. This approach is learner centered and interactive, rather than teacher dominant. Yet such an approach stood in contrast to the preferences of a number of the ESL 2 students, who strongly resisted group work. In answer to my interview question as to *why* certain students in the class might have resisted group work during her ESL 2 course, the ESL teacher revealed that "a couple students ... *explicitly* said that they did not find others working as hard as *they* were." One such student was Peter (a fact that the ESL teacher revealed to me in a follow-up email).

Further student disengagement during group work among the Chinese international students in my sample was evident at a later point during the

same peer-editing workshop. Specifically, disengagement during the peer-editing workshop became evident, not only in Peter's initial refusal to partake in the activity, but also in his reaction after his group partner finished reading his paper aloud to him. For example, when Fai offered him corrective feedback on his work, Peter responded with "I should read yours [next.]" Peter's disengagement was additionally evident when, after he finished reading his group partner's paper to him, he put his head on his desk and muttered, "Oh my gosh, so long. ..." Russell—although not as vocal as Peter about his resistance to the workshop while it was going on—also disengaged from the activity in some ways. For example, when I asked him (and his peers) if they had found any errors by the end of the activity, he stared at me and told me that he had not found any. An additional example helps to illustrate why this might have been the case.

Consistent with the findings of Schulz (1996), who found that foreign language students hold strong beliefs in favor of a focus on grammar and form when learning a language, Russell found feedback on grammar and form to be useful during group work—but he was less receptive to feedback on the content of his writing. For example, in my interview with Russell in February of 2015, Russell suggested:

About the writing, I really have strong own opinions, so I'm not willing to ... let others to change my opinion. ... [I]f you just like [to] fix the, like, the grammar and little linguistic detail about the articles ... I think that's pretty good, and I actually—I'm trying to ... do the same thing to the other groups during the discussion. But to change the opinion and to change the development and organization of the articles, I'm not willing to do. I mean ... not willing ... to let others to change my own structure, and also to change others' structure. This is just—everyone has their own styles, their own style of writing, and so ... this kind of group work, I'm—a little bit—don't want to do that, actually.

In the above interview excerpt, Russell expresses his thoughts regarding the peer feedback-based/group-based discussions that the ESL teacher organized as part of the editing process for the many papers the students in the ESL 2 class had to write. In these papers, students were asked to reference a large number of articles that they were given to read over the entirety of the quarter. Russell's description of his preferred way of doing group work suggests alignment with Schulz's (1996) findings that foreign language students believe that a focus on grammar is pertinent to the "eventual mastery of a foreign language" (p. 353)—or, at the very least, Russell emphasizes that he finds oral feedback on grammar to be important within his foreign language class (Schulz, 1996). Russell extends Schulz's (1996) findings, however, when he reveals that he is strongly resistant to receiving peer feedback on the ac-

tual *arguments* he makes within his writing (as when he suggests, in the above excerpt, that “to change the opinion and to change the development and organization of the articles, I’m not willing to do”).

Discussion

Summary

First and foremost, my findings reveal that the Chinese international ELLs in my sample prefer structure in the classroom, as well as scaffolding. As previous authors have argued (McCargar, 1993; Sawyer, 1995; Schulz, 1996), students’ expectation for structure is not particular to Chinese international ELLs, but can be applied to ELLs more broadly (McCargar, 1993; Schulz, 1996), and even to college students more generally (Sawyer, 1995). Building upon previous studies, however, my work contributes to existing literature by additionally suggesting that scaffolding, or the lack thereof, can contribute to the engagement or disengagement of students in the ESL classroom. This point is well illustrated through Peter’s and Russell’s disengagement during the peer-editing workshop (which lacked scaffolding), but engagement during another error-correction activity (which provided scaffolding).

In addition to my previous definition of scaffolding, which suggested that this concept can be viewed as a gradual release of students from teacher-dependent activities to learner-dependent activities, scaffolding can also be understood as the notion of providing just enough *language* support to a student at the beginning of the quarter (or term)—and then releasing that support as the quarter or term progresses. In this sense, Peter and Russell’s ability to use Chinese online dictionaries and converse in Chinese among themselves during the error-correction activity might be seen as a point on the scaffolding continuum. It is worth noting that, given the limited English knowledge that Peter, Russell, and some of their international Chinese classmates possessed, such scaffolding might even have been necessary all quarter.

Second, my findings support Schulz’s (1996) argument that ELLs view grammar feedback as essential to their mastery of a language. For example, Russell revealed that he would be willing to obtain feedback from his peers on grammar, but not on his arguments and structure. Third, my findings reveal that Chinese international ELLs were hesitant to engage in unstructured group work overall. Numerous examples illustrate this point, from the peer-editing workshop example to Peter’s personal conversation with the ESL teacher (which she later relayed to me, as highlighted in the Findings section). A final example is worth highlighting here. When I questioned Russell as to what a challenge with group work might be for him, he replied:

- Russell: Umm ... to have the emotion. I mean ... to have the want to work with others. [Laughs under breath.]
- Višnja: The will ...?
- Russell: Yeah ... Plus, you know ... umm ... Maybe there's some ... cultural difference, but I—I mean, in China ... if there is some group testing or work, usually we do not actually talk too much with others. So, just ... just leave the working parts and everyone doing every one part; then just come in together. So ... like, still it's called group work, but mostly, we are still doing our individual things.

Overall, Russell's dislike of group work aligns with Peacock's (2001) finding, that Chinese ELLs strongly dislike group work.

Limitations

Sample Size. Although this study makes important contributions to the literature on Chinese international ELLs' engagement in the university ESL context, it has a number of limitations. First, the small sample size of students I observed—only two of whom were international Chinese ELLs, and thus the focus of this study—severely limits the generalizability of my data. Furthermore, Peter's lack of attendance during the last several weeks of the course limited my access to potential interview participants, causing my student interview participant sample to remain at one student (Russell).

Alternative Explanations: Remedial Course Status. To this end, another important factor that this study has not yet considered is the remedial aspect of the ESL 2 course, and the impact that remedial enrollment may have had on Chinese international ELLs' engagement in the ESL classroom. Specifically, the ESL teacher revealed to me in her interview that the remedial status of the course seemed to be important in ways that she could not have predicted:

- ESL Teacher: Umm, also, this course is remedial. So, that, I think also has a different ... Umm ... I think that plays in in ways that I *could* not have predicted, or ... still don't completely understand—I definitely don't understand ...
- Višnja: So—remedial, in the sense that—I know, 'cause I know, umm ...
- ESL Teacher: Yeah, what does that mean ...?
- Višnja: They ... they—when they test ...

Later in the interview, the ESL teacher clarified:

- ESL Teacher: If they don't *pass* that class, then they get put into the remedial course.
- Višnja: They don't pass the GE course, or ...?
- ESL Teacher: The ELT (pseudonym used).
- Višnja: The exam.
- ESL Teacher: Yes.
- Višnja: Oh, okay.
- ESL Teacher: Yeah. So, I talked about not passing two things: they—that test, and then in Winter Quarter I had students who were in *ESL 2*, so they could've either been students who took *1* the quarter before, *or* who took *2* the quarter and failed, so they didn't pass. ... There's—multiple scenarios not to pass ...

In the above excerpt the ESL teacher referenced multiple scenarios that ELL students at Sunset University are required to undergo, all of which carry with them the possibility of failure (and its associated stigma): (a) The possibility of failing the English Language Test (ELT, pseudonym used) and being placed into ESL 2 and (b) the possibility of failing ESL 2 and having to retake it.

The stigma of failure may thus have affected Chinese international ELLs' motivation and engagement during the ESL 2 Winter Quarter course, and it may also have affected Peter's disappearance from the class during the last several weeks of the course. Therefore, in addition to the finding that a mismatch between students' and teachers' expectations about effective teaching correlates with Chinese international ELLs' disengagement with the course material, the course's status as remedial may very well have played a crucial role in influencing these students' engagement with the learning material. The relationship between remedial course enrollment and retention is further explored in the Implications section (under Policy Implications).

Implications

I would like to conclude this article by offering some pedagogical implications for public university ESL teachers of Chinese international ELL students to consider, as well as several important policy implications for ESL curriculum and policy planners within the US to think about.

Pedagogical Implications: Heritage Language as a Supporting Mechanism. Previous studies have shown that ESL teachers often struggle with confronting dominant nationwide ideologies such as the *deficit perspective* (Volk & Long, 2005), a dominant ideology within the US that portrays marginalized communities (e.g., international ELLs) in terms of the knowledge they lack (e.g., fluent knowledge of English)—rather than possess (e.g., emergent knowledge of English, knowledge of a second language)—within

the classroom environment. In contrast, additional authors (e.g., Menken, 2013) have shown that when teachers support the linguistic resources that bilingual students bring into the classroom, they enable students' sense of belonging, participation, and access to cultural citizenship (Menken, 2013), which refers to students' ability to fully express their cultural identities through language in the classroom (thus allowing them to fully participate and immerse themselves in classroom activities). For instance, Menken (2013) found that Spanish-English-speaking bilingual primary school students who were able to draw upon their entire range of linguistic resources and more fully express their entire cultural identities in the classroom were able to significantly enhance their academic achievement.

My study extends previous findings to the public university context by revealing that when an ESL teacher supports her students' use of their heritage language (e.g., by allowing her Chinese students to use a Chinese dictionary online, or by allowing students the freedom to work with partners of their same language background), she enhances students' involvement, participation, and their overall sense of ease within the ESL classroom context. My study thus challenges the deficit perspective as well as the English-dominant ideologies that still pervade much of the curricula of ESL classrooms at public universities within the US, including Sunset University's ESL curricula.

However, in addition to the study's pedagogical implications, such as the importance of supporting students' heritage language use within the ESL classroom, several additional implications of critical importance must also be considered within the public university ESL classroom context. Specifically, policy implications for the retention of international ELL students need to become a much larger focus for public universities such as Sunset University. This is a topic I expand upon further in the following section, where I consider the relationship between public university remedial English courses (such as ESL 2) and international ELL student retention.

Policy Implications. Beyond the specific ESL classroom I observed, Sunset University as a whole continues to have relatively low international ELL student retention rates, especially for students from China and East Asia—students who make up the majority of international ELLs at the university (personal communication, Sunset University professor, May 2018). To this end, Peter's frequent absence toward the end of the quarter represents but one instance of a larger problem with international student retention at the university. Sadly, such a problem is not unique to Sunset University specifically, and previous literature has shown that US public universities nationwide struggle with ELL student retention more generally (Chen & Simone, 2016), as well as with international ELL student retention more specifically (Mamiseishvili, 2012). One possible solution to the retention problem among international ELL students at public universities might

be to look toward existing programs that have already been successfully assisting remedial English students at the higher education level.

One such solution has been posited by Barnes and Piland (2011), who conducted a study comparing the persistence and retention of students in “stand-alone” (p. 11) remedial English courses versus remedial English courses “conducted as learning communities” (p. 11) within an urban community college program in Southern California. Despite the limitation of being conducted at a community college (rather than a four-year public institution), Barnes and Piland’s (2011) study nevertheless holds important implications for remedial English students at four-year institutions as well. They found that students who participated in learning communities (i.e., courses that were linked by way of having a common cohort of students) in developmental writing had higher retention rates than students who participated in the stand-alone course format—and this fact held true across all ethnic groups. Also noteworthy is the fact that the increase in retention for Latino students (who made up the largest proportion of students in the study) was *most* noticeable, suggesting that cultural similarity within a group might further aid in the creation of a positive community of learners (and, thus, in retention).

Notably, the idea of developing a community of learners who support each other via sustained academic interaction (e.g., by taking multiple remedial English courses together) is extended by Mamiseishvili’s (2012) finding on the importance of peer support, more generally, for international ELLs at four-year universities. Specifically, Mamiseishvili (2012) found that the successful integration of international ELL students into the campus academic system (i.e., by way of using study groups or peer support) at four-year universities in the US correlated positively with international ELL student enrollment/persistence (i.e., retention) at these universities. Still, Mamiseishvili’s (2012) data also challenged previous research (e.g., Barnes & Piland, 2011) in important ways. Specifically, while Barnes and Piland’s (2011) suggestion of building learning communities takes remedial English course enrollment as a given, Mamiseishvili’s (2012) data begin to challenge this view by positing that remedial English courses have a *negative* impact on international ELL student retention. Drawing on data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, she found that remedial English course status had significant effects on retention (i.e., that it negatively affected retention).

Unfortunately, at the end of her article Mamiseishvili (2012) additionally argued that enrollment in a remedial English course indexes international ELL students’ “lack [of] language proficiency” (p. 13) and that these students’ low GPA indexes their “lack [of] academic preparedness” (p. 13), which are *in turn* significant indicators of a lack of retention. Sadly, such reasoning fails to account for the possibility that the demotivating effects

of remedial English course status might serve to *mediate* the relationship between language preparation and retention.

Perhaps worse, such argumentation falls under the deficit perspective, which (once again) is a view that portrays international ELL students in terms of the knowledge they lack—rather than possess. Such argumentation is therefore highly problematic. To this end, the question remains: How can we *more precisely* characterize the relationship between remedial English course enrollment, language proficiency, and retention for international ELL students at four-year public universities? Furthermore, how can we best cater to these students, given what we know about their language-learning needs within the remedial English classroom context?

Providing a more nuanced insight into how US university students' academic English preparation can interact with their remedial English course enrollment to ultimately influence retention, the *2016 Statistical Analysis Report* by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that there was a distinction between retention outcomes for four-year university students coming into remedial English/reading courses with weak academic English preparation on the one hand, versus students coming into the same courses with moderate to strong academic English preparation on the other (Chen & Simone, 2016). It is important to note the report found that, for students entering remedial English with weak academic English preparation, their completion of remedial English/reading courses had a *positive* correlation with their ultimate attainment of a bachelor's degree (i.e., retention). On the other hand, for students coming in with moderate to strong academic English preparation, their completion of remedial English/reading courses had *no* correlation with their bachelor's degree attainment (i.e., retention) (Chen & Simone, 2016).

To this end, Chen and Simone's (2016) research underscores the importance of understanding that undergraduate students coming into remedial English courses at four-year universities often enter these courses with a *wide range* of academic English expertise, a fact that was also emphasized to be true for international ELL students at Sunset University more specifically (personal communication, ESL course instructor, May 2015; Sunset University professor, personal communication, May 2018.) Thus, in order to best cater to the language-learning needs of international ELL students in remedial English courses, public universities must ensure that these students receive individualized support from the university—support that takes into account their varying levels of academic English expertise. As such, Mamiseishvili (2012) has suggested that international students may benefit from enhanced communication across the support systems and networks already set in place to support them.

Specifically, Mamiseishvili (2012) posited that international student retention could be greatly aided by collaboration between international stu-

dent services and “other academic departments or support services on campus” (Mamiseishvili, 2012, p. 1). More often than not, it is currently viewed as the sole responsibility of international student advisers to uphold international student retention, and Mamiseishvili (2012) has proposed changing this reality. It is thus of utmost importance for public universities across the US to prioritize the needs of their international students by identifying specific support networks for each international student entering their university, as well as ensuring the *maintenance* of communication across such networks during the entirety of each international student’s academic trajectory. In the case of Sunset University, one such network might involve communication between ESL teachers in remedial English classrooms on the one hand, and international students’ advisers on the other.

Conclusion

As the above studies suggest, public universities in the US currently fall short of adequately catering to international ELL students entering their undergraduate academic programs, a fact that is especially true of international ELLs enrolled in remedial English courses at US public universities. To this end, such universities must look into not only building communicative support networks for international ELL students (Mamiseishvili, 2012) more broadly, but also enhancing the communication between *course planners* of remedial English courses on the one hand, and the teachers of these courses themselves. Such teachers are often keenly aware of the issues that international ELL students face within the remedial English classroom environment, including the issues faced by Chinese international ELL students more specifically (e.g., the students in this study). Such issues center on the tension that results from differences in academic English preparation among students in the remedial English classroom (personal communication, ESL course instructor, May 2015), a dislike of the way peer-editing activities are structured, and (more recently) a dislike of course readings that is due to Chinese students being portrayed in a disrespectful and untrustworthy fashion in these readings (personal communication, ESL course instructor #2, April 2018).

If course planners of remedial English classes at public universities became more seriously invested in obtaining feedback from the teachers of these courses themselves, such planners would be able to ensure that the required curriculum of these courses was better designed to fit the language-learning needs of international ELLs (and perhaps additionally tackle the issue of grouping international ELLs into remedial English classes—as much as possible—with peers who share their level of academic English proficiency). This would increase international ELLs’ engagement with the remedial English course material, as well as their motivation for passing the course, and might thus begin to tackle the international ELL student retention issue.

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Author

Višnja Miložičić is a third-year Linguistics Master of Arts student at the University of California, Davis, and an alumna of the UC Davis School of Education. Her research centers on how second-language policy affects English language learners throughout the US.

Note

¹G-8 countries (or *Group of 8 countries*) listed in the report included Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and the US.

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Appendix

Student Interview Protocol

1. What were your expectations for how your group would interact, when the teacher put you into your assigned writing group?
2. What was a challenge you faced in working with a member of your assigned writing group? Follow-up: How did you overcome this challenge?
3. Did you feel that you had the opportunity to voice your opinions and beliefs to your assigned writing group? Prompt(s): Do you feel like they understood you and listened to you? Were you able to express your views or opinions to them? Can you give an example?
4. What was a challenge you faced in working with a member of your informal writing group? Follow-up: How did you overcome this challenge?
5. Did you feel that you had the opportunity to voice your opinions and beliefs to your informal writing group? Prompt(s): Do you feel like they understood you and listened to you? Were you able to express your views or opinions to them? Follow-up: Can you give an example?
6.
 - a. What changed for you, when the teacher allowed you to go back to work with whomever you wanted to?
 - b. Did you have more or fewer opportunities to voice your opinions and beliefs? Follow-up: Can you explain?
7. Do you feel that you have the opportunity to voice your opinions and beliefs to the teacher during class? Follow-up: Can you give an example of this?
8. How did the teacher respond when you told her about the object modifier grammar rule associated with the phrase “hanging out?” Follow-up: Were you satisfied with this response?
9. How did you feel about the peer-editing workshop activity? Prompt: The one where you all had to read each other’s papers aloud, and then highlight the errors on your own papers ...? Follow-up(s): Did you think the peer-editing workshop activity was an effective way for you to figure out your mistakes? What could have made the activity more effective for you?

Teacher Interview Protocol

Read aloud prior to interview:

In this interview, I will ask you questions about your expectations regarding class structure as it relates to student engagement, as well as questions about what you perceive students' expectations were about class structure as it relates to their own engagement in the class. The sample I am choosing to focus on is the students in your Winter Quarter 2015 class.

1. What were your expectations for how your students should interact with each other in their writing groups during group work time?
2. Did your students interact with each other in the way(s) you expected them to? Why or why not?
3. Do you think your expectations for student group work interaction (during class) matched those of your students? Why or why not?
4. Why might some students resist interacting with each other during group/partner work time?
5. What were some of the main learning goals of the ESL class, for you? Follow-up(s): How did the class structure allow you to achieve those goals? Do you think students in the class were familiar with the type of structure you laid out in the ESL class?
6. What type of class structure do you think some of your students were used to, based on how they were taught back in their home countries? Follow-up: How might the class structure your students grew up with (in their home countries) differ from the type of class structure we use here in the United States?
7. What were your expectations for how whole-class discussions would occur?
8. Did your students engage in whole-class discussion(s) in the way(s) you expected them to? Why or why not?
9. Do you think your expectations for whole-class discussion matched those of your students? Why or why not?
10. What were your expectations for how your one-on-one conversations with your students would occur?
11. Did these one-on-one conversations occur in the way(s) you expected them to? Why or why not?
12. Do you think your expectations for how one-on-one conversations would occur matched those of your students? Why or why not?