

English Learners' Belief and Investment in English Pronunciation Learning

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Abstract—Apprehensive pronunciation is crucial for learners' language competence and is an integral aspect of language instruction. Although English major students in China demonstrate improvement in their overall English proficiency when they enter university, many still struggle with their English pronunciation. Scholars have identified several internal and external factors that influence English pronunciation learning. However, little attention is given to the role of learners' beliefs and investment as possible factors that influence English pronunciation learning, which in turn affect the learning approach and learning strategy used. To fill the gap, the current study adopts a qualitative design with multiple case studies to explore students' beliefs, investments, and the relationship between these two concepts within the normative, meta-cognitive and contextual approach as well as investment theory. A semi-structured interview was conducted on three university students with different language abilities. The data obtained was analysed using NVivo 12 software. The findings of the study indicate that middle and high-level participants held positive perceptions, while low-level participants held negative perceptions in terms of English pronunciation learning. The study also reveals two forms of investment; diverse investment and incidental learning. In addition, the relationship between students' beliefs and investments exhibited complex phenomena such as positive and negative congruence as well as incongruence. Based on these findings, some pedagogical implications and areas for ongoing research were proposed.

Index Terms—congruence, English major students, English pronunciation, investment, learning belief

I. INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation in language studies is a fundamental component of communicative competence (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Jones, 2018). English pronunciation represents a significant challenge for ESL learners, who must invest considerable time to improve in this area (Aliaga-García, 2007; Gilakjani, 2016). Despite having perfect grammar and vocabulary, those with pronunciation issues have a lower chance of being understood correctly in oral communication (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Thomson & Derwing, 2014; Gilakjani, 2016). Conversely, with acceptable pronunciation, a speaker's speech can be understandable despite having problems with other aspects of the language (Gilakjani, 2016). Although there are some improvements in overall English proficiency in China among major university students, a significant proficiency gap in pronunciation persists, necessitating focused research (Zhou & Song, 2015; Duan & Cao, 2017; Liu, 2021). Unlike some studies that have explored English learners' pronunciation learning beliefs in terms of importance (Pawlak, 2015; Phuong & Phuong, 2019), strategy (Simon & Taverniers, 2011), and difficulty (Benzies, 2013; Pawlak et al., 2015), in China, scholars (Zhang, 2009; Dang & Cui, 2013) just identified internal factors like age, aptitude, attitude, motivation, and external factors such as educational factors that influence English pronunciation learning. Hence, more researches need to investigate Chinese learners' English pronunciation beliefs and investment in English pronunciation learning.

According to Norton (2013), if learners invest in the target language, it is because they believe they will acquire wider access to symbolic and material resources, thereby adding value to their cultural capital and social power. It is evident that learners' language investment choices are affected by their views on the social status of the mainstream language (Babino & Stewart, 2017; Ballinger, 2017; Babino & Stewart, 2019; Bea, 2014). However, an individual's beliefs and actions are not always consistent (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011). Therefore, the gaps between English learners' beliefs and investment are worthwhile to explore. Given that there are over 600,000 English major students currently studying English at tertiary institutions nationwide in China (Guo, 2020), it is necessary to hear learners' own beliefs and investment in English pronunciation learning in these institutions. In addressing these issues, this study hopes to contribute to the theoretical explanation of the nature of relationships between learner beliefs and learning investment in

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English as a foreign language within the Chinese context. In addition, the outcome of this study could provide implications for English teachers and the country's policymakers to make adjustments based on learners' needs.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Studies on Learners' Beliefs About English Pronunciation Learning*

While Cohen (1984) and Horwitz (1988) established foundational aspects of language learning beliefs, their application to pronunciation specifically remains underexplored, warranting further investigation in this study. These groundbreaking studies in theoretical frameworks such as normal and meta-cognitive approach treated beliefs primarily as stable cognitive entities deriving from one's own experiences or the opinions of others (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2013). Nonetheless, there has been a shift in the way that research has conceptualised beliefs during the past 20 years. Recent work in the contextual approach has emphasised the subjective aspects of language learning (Ellis, 2008; Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011). This has led to the recognition of beliefs as being highly contextual, social, and dynamic. Thus, language acquisition beliefs comprise a multifaceted system of dynamic, interconnected elements, such as cognitive, social, cultural, and personal. They necessitate a thorough analysis of the distinct learning experience, including all of its constituent parts, including the student, instructor, learning process, particular learning environment, peers, curriculum, and the outside world (Inözü, 2018).

While learner beliefs have been investigated in various areas of language learning acquisition, the learning and teaching of language pronunciation are scarce in the literature on language acquisition beliefs (Brown, 2009). So far, only a small number of studies have been conducted in this area. Similarly, even though existing studies, such as those by Kanellou (2011), Tokumoto and Shibata (2011), Pawlak et al. (2015), and Phuong and Phuong (2019) have examined attitudes toward pronunciation and objectives of mastering pronunciation, the interplay between beliefs and investment within this domain remains under researched. Furthermore, some studies have focused on learners' preferences or challenges when learning pronunciation (Benzies, 2013; Pawlak et al., 2015) as well as strategies for English pronunciation learning (Simon & Tavernniers, 2011). Another topic of research interest is learners' beliefs about the factors influencing pronunciation acquisition (Cenoz & Lecumberri, 1999). Since language and identity are closely related, research has also been done on how EFL learners see themselves when pronouncing English (Szyszka, 2011; Trofimovich & Gatbonton, 2006) and how this influences their oral performance (Szyszka, 2011).

In essence, the majority of the previously described research exclusively uses questionnaires to gather learners' opinions, with two of the studies utilising speech evaluation tasks. These data collection methods are believed to greatly restrict students' opportunity to share their opinions and facilitate in-depth discussion. Since most of these studies are conducted outside of China, this study aims to investigate how Chinese learners understand learners' English pronunciation, and their learning beliefs, especially in terms of its status where English pronunciation is tested in high-stakes examinations.

B. *Investment Theory in English Learning*

Norton and Darwin (2015) put forward the model of investment to comprehensively explain the language learning problems from social-cultural problems. It is an important concept that is hinged on the other three concepts: identity, capital, and ideology. In language learning and teaching, investment is a crucial explanatory concept that provides a framework for comprehending students' diverse desires to participate in social interactions and community activities (Norton, 2013). Investing in second language acquisition suggests a change in motivation research from the prevailing cognitive psychology approaches to a more sociocultural one, highlighting the intricate connection between language learner identity and language learning commitment (Norton Peirce, 1995). It challenges the conceptualisation of motivation as a binary, static, and singular construct. It also adopts a more fluid, dynamic, and contextualized perspective, regarding language learners as historically and socially constructed individuals with a variety of desires and identities. This social turn (Block, 2003) supports the study of language learners' identities that fundamentally vary over different times and places, and they may even contradict one another within a single person (Norton, 2013).

Since it was proposed, "investment" has attracted the attention of second language acquisition scholars and led to several relevant studies. Some studies refer to "investment" in the target language (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002; Potowski, 2001), learners' language investment in the dual immersion classroom (Babino & Stewart, 2017; Ballinger, 2017), and multilingual investment of language learners (Babino & Stewart, 2019). Other studies involve "investment" in specific language skills such as writing (McKay & Wong, 1996), in particular, aspects of language such as discourse (McKay & Wong, 1996), and language learning projects such as adult ESL training projects (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). Therefore, it is clear that these studies have focused on the investment in English as a whole, more attention is needed to see the influence of investment in the framework of EFL, such as English pronunciation learning. Investment theory, as articulated by Norton, underscores the socio-cultural dimensions of language learning, which this study applies to unravel the nuanced ways learners invest in pronunciation skills.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. *Research Question*

The present study adopts a multiple case study to investigate English major students' English pronunciation learning belief and investment in China, with a particular focus on the nature of belief–investment relationships under the guidance of normative, metacognitive and contextual approaches (Barcelos, 2003) and Norton's (2015) proposed investment model. The research questions that guide the analysis of this study are as follows:

1. What are the beliefs of English major students regarding their English pronunciation learning in China?
2. How do English major students invest in their English pronunciation learning in China?
3. How are English major students' pronunciation learning beliefs congruent with their investment in learning English pronunciation?

B. Participants

In this study, participants were selected via purposive sampling. The selection criteria were based on the potential of learning the most from the participants' experiences (Merriam, 1998). The first criterion is the difference in their language proficiency levels, which is one of the key factors that shape their different language learning beliefs (Barcelos, 2003; Simon & Taverniers, 2011; Mercer, 2011) and their investment (Norton, 2015). The second criterion is differences in academic backgrounds, as the learners' learning experiences play an important role in shaping their unique learning beliefs (Barcelos, 2003; Horwitz, 1987). Hence, the participants selected for this study are from different academic backgrounds and English pronunciation proficiency. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the participants in this study; students' real names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

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

C. Data Collection

The multiple data collection methods in this study were face-to-face semi-structured interviews that were audio-taped, classroom observation, students' diaries, and related documents. All the data were recorded to better compare and triangulate different sources to make the research findings and interpretation credible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The data were collected between March to June 2022. Each interview lasted for an hour and was conducted in Mandarin within the university compound. In between the data collection process, the researcher maintained regular communication with the participants via email and phone calls. Although these data are not collected for analysis, they increase the credibility of the stories that participants share.

D. Data Analysis

The process of data analysis was iterative and dynamic, entailing several (re)readings of data collected from diverse sources (Patton, 1990). The interview material was translated into English after being verbatim transcribed. The translations from Mandarin to English were sent to the participants for verification and to authenticate the data. After that, they were encoded with the help of NVivo 12 software and analysed using a paradigm analysis programme to generate taxonomies and categories from common elements throughout the database (Polkinghorn, 1995). To confirm the emergent findings, major themes from the interviews were identified and triangulated with other data. The recurrent themes and patterns found in the analysis were further examined in terms of theoretical framework. Finally, following a member-checking process, summaries of the initial findings were sent back to the participants for their feedback, (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

IV. RESULTS

Data from the semi-structured interviews, class observation, diaries, and related documents were used to answer the three research questions of participants' beliefs regarding their English pronunciation learning, how they invest in their English pronunciation, and whether their pronunciation learning beliefs are congruent with their investment in learning English pronunciation. From the analysis, the three participants appear to have their own beliefs and investments, and revealed different congruency between belief and investment in English pronunciation learning.

A. Chen's Belief and Investment in English Pronunciation Learning

(a). Chen's Belief in English Pronunciation Learning

1. Imagined Identity

Chen believed that good pronunciation helped her realise her imagined identities. Since childhood, she has been watching movies, TikTok videos, singing songs and dubbing short videos that are in English. These audio and video

materials not only made her feel the elegance of the British accent and the confidence of the American accent but also made her realise that pronunciation was the soul of a character. It played a critical role in shaping her imagined identity as a famed celebrity such as an English blogger, singer, and actress. For example, she dreamed of being a singer like Taylor Swift who spoke authentic General American and encouraged her fans to be positive people. Chen also imagined that she could be a lively and interesting English blogger like Ma Siri and Cardi B who shared cultural differences around the world.

Chen: I imagined that if I became famous in the future, I would go abroad, and my fans would communicate with me.

Interviewer: To be famous, what kind of celebrity do you become?

Chen: Singer. The music style tends to be Western genre. If my fans were from abroad, I wanted to communicate with them. Then if my English pronunciation was not good enough, it would make me feel embarrassed and my fans may think that I didn't respect them. I wanted to speak English well and had a better chance to communicate with them, which made them feel that I loved them very much.

Interviewer: How do you understand the relationship between these identities and pronunciation?

Chen: Pronunciation is the soul of a person. You can judge a person's character, temperament, and even identity through their pronunciation. (CIT2-557-578)

2. *Social Capital*

Social capital refers to connections to networks of power (Bourdieu, 1986), which includes amicable relationships with peers and teachers as well as access to quality learning environments, either at school or home, that facilitate learning (Park, 2019). For Chen, English pronunciation helped her realise her imagined identity and broaden her social capital. Chen admitted that she was dissatisfied and despised her current circle of friends as, according to her, they were too lazy to improve their English skills. She expressed eagerness to integrate into more supportive social circles elsewhere. As she loved singing and performing, she hoped to make friends with her favourite stars to gain more performance experience, singing skills, and multicultural knowledge. Chen believed that proficient English pronunciation would facilitate her integration into these esteemed social circles.

Chen: I enjoy making friends. If I speak English well, I wish I could make friends with my idols like Taylor Swift, Ma Si Rui, etc. I think they are very interesting and versatile so I can learn some English singing skills and multicultural knowledge from them. Unlike some girls who gossip and haggle, I don't like them at all.

Interviewer: How is this related to your pronunciation learning?

Chen: If you want to get into these high-quality friend circles, good English pronunciation is necessary. Otherwise, there is no way to effectively communicate with them. (CIT3-257-268)

3. *Cultural Capital*

Chen also realized that English pronunciation can improve English listening scores in the examination. Since primary school, she has attended different extra-curricular training classes to learn English. Unlike teachers in formal schools who focused on written examinations, teachers in training classes systematically focused on lecturing English phonetic knowledge, which helped her to improve her English listening and speaking abilities. As a result, her listening scores were always among the highest in junior and senior high schools and universities,

Interviewer: What do you think about the role of English pronunciation in the exam?

Chen: The teacher also told me that if you can't speak clearly, you will not hear clearly and your listening will be poor. So, I thought if I could speak clearly and well, my listening would be better.

Interviewer: To get a high score in the examination?

Chen: Yes, like CET-4, CET-6, TEM-4, or IELTS. (CIT3-565-579)

(b). *Chen's English Pronunciation Learning Investment*

Diverse Investment

Chen believed that English pronunciation was important as it could help her gain symbolic and material resources as well as construct an imagined identity. Hence, in and out of class, she took her agency to invest in English pronunciation learning. Based on classroom observation, Chen managed to create the opportunity to improve her fluency through her pair work and group discussion participation. In these activities, she was willing to be a little teacher who shared her opinions and corrected her classmates' pronunciation, thus confirming the view that the English oral classroom provided an opportunity to speak English.

Interviewer: How do you learn English pronunciation out of class?

Chen: Outside of class, almost no one spoke English. Then I grasped the chance to speak English in the English oral class. Otherwise, there will be fewer opportunities to speak. (CIT2-120-122)

Sitting in the front row of her classroom, Chen was an active learner in the English listening and speaking classes, participating in occasional phonetic learning activities. For example, when her teacher lectured phonetic knowledge in a sentence, she listened intently to the teacher's instruction and was the first to raise her hand to demonstrate.

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

Students: Yes.

Teacher: Any volunteers who can read for us?

Chen: I want to have a try (hands up and then proceeded after the teacher allowed it). Chang was feeling very unhappy because a friend had died.

Teacher: Good. A friend had died. Only the bold could be read louder. Read again.

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

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

Chen's desired method of learning phonetics is through oral communication. Since her circle of friends was not willing to speak in English outside of the classroom, she had to persist in self-study by singing songs, acquiring phonetic knowledge through network resources, and doing English dubbing exercises. She spent a lot of time and energy imitating the intonation, strong form, weak form and pauses to perfectly portray the emotions and personalities of different characters in the video that she watched. In her diary, she recorded in detail how to learn English pronunciation while dubbing an American television sitcom series.

During my engagement with the series *Broken Girls*, I discovered a pertinent clip I first listened to the dialogue between the two women, then began to imitate them. To better show their get-rich-overnight mentality, I annotated the clip to indicate rising and falling intonation weak form, and strong form and pause to assist me. (CD-1-3-May-13)

(c). *Congruent Between Belief and Investment in English Pronunciation Learning*

Based on Chen's formal and informal English pronunciation learning experiences, she strongly believed that good English pronunciation could help her construct her imagined identities as well as cultural capital. Hence, she continued investing in English pronunciation with positive identities both in and out of the classroom. Chen's investment in English pronunciation learning is closely aligned with her beliefs.

B. *Xi's Belief and Investment in English Pronunciation Learning*

(a). *Xi's Belief in English Pronunciation Learning*

1. *Imagined Identity*

Despite being an English translation student, Xi aspired to become an English teacher, finding the challenges in translation work too formidable. She related how her English pronunciation had been deeply influenced by her English teacher in junior high school and the phonetic teacher at the university. The former teacher was her English pronunciation learning enlightenment teacher, who shaped her correct pronunciation habits, while the latter, professionally increased her phonetic knowledge. While affirming the positive impact of these two teachers on her pronunciation learning, she also criticised other teachers for their unqualified pronunciation which resulted in poor pronunciation of students. Influenced by the Confucian culture of respecting teachers and valuing education in China, she thought teachers are regarded as role models for students and good English pronunciation is a prerequisite for becoming a teacher. Thus, it was her imagined identity as an English teacher that made her realise the importance of English pronunciation.

Interviewer: How did you think your future employment would affect English pronunciation learning?

Xi: I was an English translation student. But I want to be an English teacher. There was another matter to be an English teacher. When you were a teacher, you had to learn it well, because you couldn't hand over the bad English pronunciation to the students, nor did you bring negative influence on them. If you let the bad influences go, that was very serious in his entire learning journey. (XIT2-30-36)

2. *Cultural Capital*

At the university, Xi was influenced by the view of her English translation teacher who said that intelligible English pronunciation was crucial for successful communication. Xi then realized that English pronunciation was not merely a component of English learning, but also affected listening and speaking. She argued that if learners' pronunciation was not achieved at the comprehensible level, communication would be a big problem.

Interviewer: How did you think of the role of pronunciation in English learning?

Xi: I thought it was a basic role for listening and communication. At least your pronunciation should make others understand. (XIT1-585-589)

Additionally, Xi believed that English pronunciation affected listening scores in the written examination. In China, the English examination is focused on listening, writing, and reading. The listening score accounted for one-fifth of the total score in both the high school and college entrance examinations. Furthermore, the proportion of listening scores for English majors in CET-4 and CET-8 has even increased to one-third of the total score. As a test-educated student, Xi was acutely aware that if her English pronunciation was not good, she would not be able to get the correct answers in the listening section, which could lead to failing these high-stakes examinations.

Interviewer: How do you think its role in terms of examination?

Xi: Generally speaking, it is important for the examination as it is related to English listening and accounted for a big proportion of the total score of the examination. If your pronunciation were not good, the chances to

fail would rise. (XIT1-594-598)

(b). *Xi's English Pronunciation Learning Investment*

1. *Incidental Pronunciation Learning*

Xi perceived English pronunciation as primarily beneficial for obtaining symbolic and material resources as well as realising her imagined identity. However, in practice, she characterised her pronunciation learning as incidental, secondary to her primary focus on vocabulary. For example, since sophomore year, Xi has been concentrating more on passing her TEM-4 examinations and has not paid as much attention to English pronunciation in her daily learning, like "Now I am occupied with the TEM-4 exam and haven't paid attention to the pronunciation"(XD-22-May-8). In the class, even though Xi actively took part in the oral discussion in the English listening and speaking class, her focus was almost on looking for the answers to questions and taking advantage of opportunities to express her opinion, rather than on the pronunciation.

Interviewer: How did you feel in the process of communicating with your teacher?

Xi: The teacher was always engaging and supportive in communication, keen to understand student perspectives. At the same time, he also liked to share his ideas with us.

Interviewer: Okay. Did you think it was significant to improve English pronunciation?

Xi: It might enhance my confidence and fluency. Nevertheless, I concentrated more on exchanging ideas rather than English pronunciation at that moment. (XELSSIT1-290-303)

For Xi, English pronunciation learning was only occasionally acquired while memorising words, doing dictation, and watching videos online. For instance, she believed vocabulary was the most important factor affecting the written examination as many English words were polysemy. Thus, each day, she intentionally insisted on reciting the high-frequency vocabulary in the TEM-4 with the app named BuBeiDanCi, concentrating her effort on the meaning, usage, and pronunciation of English words. She recorded in her diary how she learned English pronunciation.

During May Day, I learned the pronunciation by memorising words, such as soliloquy/ sə'lıləkwı/n. vicious/'vɪʃəs/adj. In this process, I paid more attention to the spelling and meaning of words. The pronunciation learning was incidental. The reason for learning pronunciation was to know the pronunciation of words. I did not deliberately learn pronunciation. (XD-1-5-May-8)

2. *Key Challenges*

Xi mentioned three factors that inhibited English pronunciation learning investment. Firstly, English pronunciation was not tested in the written examination. As an undergraduate student, her biggest wish was to pass both the TEM-4 and TEM-8 examinations and be admitted to a graduate student in English education. These high-stakes exams had almost no requirement for pronunciation. Thus, at the current stage, she chose to be a test-machine and ignored English pronunciation learning.

Interviewer: Did you mean giving up learning English pronunciation?

Xi: No. But at present, I would not go to learn (about pronunciation). I have to pass the TEM-4 and TEM-8. They were extremely important for English major students in China. If we failed in these exams, we will face big trouble when we look for jobs.

Interviewer: How about English pronunciation learning?

Xi: These exams do not detect pronunciation. Maybe in my postgraduate period, I anticipate dedicating more time to pronunciation improvement despite current exam pressures. (XDIT5-719-722)

Secondly, there was a lack of institutional support for English pronunciation learning. Xi complained that the English phonetic courses were too short to cover supra-segmental features in the freshman year. There was neither an English pronunciation-related course since sophomore nor a systematic English pronunciation examination designed by China's English examination policy to test her English pronunciation ability. Hence, Xi felt confused about how to improve and overcome her English pronunciation problem. She hoped to be led by the teacher hand in hand like in the freshmen year.

Interviewer: Then, what else factors influence your disinvestment?

Xi: Currently, there is an absence of dedicated English phonetic courses or related examinations that limit our guidance in this area. The teachers did not pay attention to this pronunciation problem and did not emphasize it, so we did not pay attention to it. Like in the first year, when the teacher paid attention to it, we would spend a lot of time on it. But now, so I didn't intentionally care about pronunciation anymore. (XIT1-763-767)

Due to the influence of long-term exam-oriented education, few students around her were willing to communicate in English. Thus, the third challenge was the fear of being ridiculed by her friends for speaking in English. She complained that some classmates mocked her for deliberately showing off when she took the initiative to speak in English in their daily life. Gradually, her desire to invest in second language communication activities to improve English pronunciation began to decrease.

Interviewer: You mentioned that it was influenced by the environment so you rarely communicated with each other in daily life. Can you particularly talk about the environment?

Xi: They were used to communicating in Chinese and unwilling to break through their comfort area to

communicate in English. Sometimes, when I talked to them in English, hoping to practice fluency, they thought I was showing off and laughed at my Chinglish. Hence, I had to give up. (XIT4-437-442)

(c). *Incongruent Between Belief and Investment in English Pronunciation Learning*

In Xi's case, her belief was different from her investment in English pronunciation learning. She cherished the role of pronunciation in listening and speaking as well as imagined identity construction. However, in reality, due to some contextual factors, her main energy and time were invested in written exams, while only incidentally learning English pronunciation either in the classroom or outside.

C. *Lan's Belief and Investment in English Pronunciation Learning*

(a). *Lan's Belief in English Pronunciation Learning*

Cinderella

In Lan's view, English pronunciation learning was unimportant. Since pronunciation is not tested in the written exams, just like a Cinderella, Lan ignored it. During junior and senior high schools, Lan spent most of her energy and time on vocabulary and grammar which were crucial for the junior and senior high entrance examinations. In the first semester of freshman year, despite the English phonetic teacher emphasising the way and manner of articulation, and telling students the role of English pronunciation in listening and speaking, Lan's belief still did not change. She persisted that English pronunciation did not need as much attention as the CET4, CET6, TEM4, and TEM8. None of these examinations tested English pronunciation. The following narratives highlighted her beliefs;

Since I began to learn English, what I learned most was vocabulary and grammar. In the college entrance examination, it didn't test our pronunciation. Now in the university, all exams do not involve pronunciation. Actually, if you don't know the words, you're in trouble. While, if your pronunciation is not good, it will be fine. (LIT2-478-480)

Besides, English pronunciation played a limited role in her daily communication. Lan recalled that from childhood to adulthood, everyone communicates in Chinese. Even in the classroom, there are not many opportunities to communicate in English. Thus, she felt that even if the English pronunciation is not good, it will not bring any problems or disadvantages.

I thought its status is pretty low, and everyone didn't pay much attention to ityou know daily communication is in Chinese. Even in the English class, there are few opportunities to communicate in English. It's okay to ignore it. (LIT1-638-640)

(b). *Lan's English Pronunciation Learning Investment*

Incidental Pronunciation Learning

Since English pronunciation acquisition is rarely covered in her classes, Lan suggested to the researcher that classroom observations were not necessary. Hence, the researcher focused on Lan's extra-curricular pronunciation learning. Lan admitted that her energy was centred on her TEM-4 examination, thus did not invest in English pronunciation outside of the classroom. Based on the findings in her diary, Lan described how she incidentally learned English pronunciation. For example, aiming to successfully deal with the reading and cloze exercises in the TEM-4, she took a certain amount of time every day to memorize vocabulary with the help of the MaiMemo app. In the process of encountering unfamiliar words, she would look up the pronunciation of the words.

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

(c). *Congruent Between Belief and Investment in English Pronunciation Learning*

Generally speaking, Lan seldom paid attention to English pronunciation both in and out of the classroom. Instead, she focused on preparation work for the TEM-4 examination, such as reciting vocabulary and grammar knowledge. In terms of pronunciation learning, it was usually incidental learning when she met unfamiliar words in the process of reading and reciting vocabulary. It was evident that her investment behaviors were mapped with her English pronunciation learning belief.

V. DISCUSSION

A. *The Middle and High-Level Proficiency Participants Hold Positive English Pronunciation Learning Beliefs, While the Low-Level Proficiency Participants With Opposing Ideas*

This study reveals that middle and high-level participants held positive English pronunciation learning beliefs, while low-level participants had opposing ideas. These findings concur with other studies that found differences in learning

beliefs held by participants at different language levels (Barcelos, 2003; Simon & Taverniers, 2011; Mercer, 2011). Influenced by their past and present formal or informal English pronunciation learning experiences and teachers' opinions, high and middle-level participants like Chen and Xi believe that pronunciation can improve their English listening scores and increase the chance of making friends with other excellent individuals. These findings are similar to studies in other EFL contexts (Alghazo, 2015; Pawlak et al., 2015; Nowacka, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2021) and further supported the view that learners' beliefs are based on their personal experiences as well as the opinions of others. (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2013).

By examining their English pronunciation learning importance beliefs, it is suggested that there is an interrelationship between their imagined identities and beliefs, which aligns with the findings of other EFL studies (Nowacka, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2021). In this study, Chen believed that good English pronunciation played a crucial role in constructing her imagined identities such as a Western singer, actor, and blogger. Similarly, Xi thought good English pronunciation was a prerequisite for her to be an English teacher. It indicated that learners' beliefs are intrinsically related to identities (Woods, 2003; Chen et al., 2020).

However, Lan who has a low proficiency of English pronunciation believes that English pronunciation is Cinderella, concurring with other findings in the Chinese EFL contexts like Xu (2015). William et al. (2015) explained that national or educational culture at the macro level, and various aspects at the micro level such as friends, peers, and family members, influence individual beliefs. Thus, under the influence of English written-examination education culture and in an environment where there is limited use of English in daily life and learning, Lan felt that vocabulary and grammar are the most important English language skills, treating English pronunciation as unimportant and can be ignored. In this sense, learner beliefs are contextually oriented and socially constructed (Barcelos, 2003; Mercer, 2011).

B. Learners' Sense of Agency Influences Investment in English Pronunciation Learning

Agency encompasses both the will of the individual to act and the actual acts taken to accomplish their objectives (Pavlenko, 2000). In this study, as a high-level participant, Chen actively exerted her agency to construct numerous positive identities such as a little teacher in the English oral class, an active learner in the English listening and speaking class, and a self-disciplined learner out of class. These were done to promote her investment in English pronunciation learning to achieve the symbolic and material resources and to realise her imagined identities. However, since the agency was not "socially unfettered free will" (Ahaern, 2001, p. 112), it was equally critical to recognize the numerous contextual and personal limitations on participants' exercise of agency in investing in learning English pronunciation. Thus, agency can be both constitutive of and constituted by social structures (Block, 2007). In this study, when Xi faced constraints such as a written exam culture, a lack of institutional support for English pronunciation learning, and abusive power, she did not use her agency to overcome them. Instead, she cast herself as a poor, passive English pronunciation learner and test-machine to escape English pronunciation learning. These findings corresponded with Norton and Toohey's (2001) view that good learners are more likely to take advantage of human agency to negotiate their way into social networks, thereby practicing and improving their proficiency in the target language. However, the impoverished students were constrained by their contexts and were unwilling to use their agency to promote improvements in their EFL learning (Teng, 2019).

C. Complex Relationship Between Belief and Investment

In terms of the relationship between belief and investment, three categories emerged that illustrate different degrees of congruency or incongruency between learners' beliefs and investment. Only Chen demonstrated a positive congruence between her beliefs and investment. In other words, her belief and investment displayed the importance of English pronunciation learning. These results corroborated Norton's (2015) claims that language learners invested in a language with the hope of gaining access to a greater variety of tangible and symbolic resources, which improved their self-perception and aspirations for the future.

On the other hand, Lan showed a negative congruence between her belief and investment. Her belief and investment did not show the importance she attached to English pronunciation learning, which indicates a serious problem faced in English teaching and learning. Although adult learners advance at different degrees due to factors like motivation and attitude (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011), it has already been demonstrated that pronunciation components contribute to increasing learners' abilities in the English language. Therefore, communicative competency would not be achieved if English pronunciation—one essential component—was ignored and the situation continued. Learners would be denied the opportunity to form positive self-images with good pronunciation (Ahmad Shah, 2014).

In her case, Xi showed an incongruent between her beliefs and investment. This finding not only indicated that putting learners' beliefs into investment was not a smooth process (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011) but also revealed that learners' beliefs were not the only variable affecting the formation of their investment in and out of the classroom. There were some social-cultural and contextual factors (Sung, 2019) like written examination, lack of institutional support for English pronunciation learning, and abusive power (Mona & Rodríguez, 2017) that prevented her from investing in English pronunciation learning.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE STUDIES

This multiple-case study involving three English major students in China has examined ESL learners' beliefs and investment patterns specifically in English pronunciation as well as the relationship between their belief and investment in the framework of normative, metacognitive and contextual approaches (Barcelos, 2003) and investment (Norton, 2015). The findings indicate that participants have positive and negative beliefs and investments in terms of English pronunciation learning. In addition, the relationship between their beliefs and investments also exhibits diversity. Based on these findings, this study provides some significant insight.

From a theoretical perspective, there are two aspects worth noting. Firstly, while previous studies are limited to general English learning, the current study attempts to apply investment theory to explore English pronunciation learning in the EFL context. This study contributes to expanding investment theory research, endorsing the 'social turn' in English pronunciation learning. Secondly, previous studies only pointed out that learners' beliefs affect their investment (Norton, 2015), but did not explore the relationship between the two concepts. This study fills this gap by revealing positive congruent, negative congruent and incongruent relationships between learners' beliefs and investment, which not only proves that learners' beliefs influence their investment behaviour but also finds that some social-cultural and contextual factors will restrict the transformation of learning beliefs into investment behaviour.

In addition, this study also provides several empirical implications for policymakers, schools, and teachers. Firstly, the study illustrated that some participants' negative beliefs were shaped by the exam-oriented education system, where the instruction objectives, content, and methods neglect English pronunciation. Therefore, English education policymakers should incorporate English pronunciation tests into English exams to increase students' emphasis on English pronunciation. Secondly, there is a lack of support for an English pronunciation environment in and out of the classroom. Hence, foreign language schools should increase the activities related to English pronunciation learning such as English corner and cross-cultural communication periodically. Thirdly, the English teacher should be responsible for correcting learners' naive beliefs and creating a positive English pronunciation learning environment to help learners build more realistic and achievable beliefs in English pronunciation learning.

In conclusion, this multiple case study is limited to the three participants in their first year of university. Overall, while exploring their beliefs and investments to understand ESL learners' English pronunciation learning, it is important to note that learners' beliefs and investments are unique and should be understood in their contexts. A more comprehensive understanding would have been elicited if more participants were interviewed. Therefore, one of the limitations of this study is not to generalise these findings to all ESL learners. Besides, since the data collection phase was carried out during the COVID-19 epidemic and schools were almost closed, the observation was only conducted on campus and not in other situations. Hence, for future studies, other research can be conducted to explore other learning contexts of learning pronunciations.

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