

Investment in Learning English: A Case Study of Chinese LOTE Learners

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Abstract

With the increasing global status of China's economy, languages other than English education (LOTE) in China has experienced an unprecedented expansion size. The importance of offering language programs is particularly relevant and geographically significant in China's border provinces. Yunnan, China's Southwest border province, has been discursively positioned as an ideal space for cultivating South Asian and Southeast Asian language learners for China's cross-cultural communication. However, while majoring in LOTE, Chinese students have to prove their proficiency in English both for academic attainment and employment prospect. This study examines how English is ideologically embedded in the learning process of LOTE learners in the context of China's socioeconomic transformation and regional integration with its neighbouring countries. Adopting the concept of language, investment and ideology (Darvin & Norton, 2015), the study explores the English learning experiences of Chinese undergraduates majoring in LOTE in a Chinese border university in Yunnan. Findings reveal how LOTE learners attach great importance on English and see English as a symbolic capital which can be translated into academic credits and facilitate their future educational and social mobility. Findings also demonstrate that LOTE learners take advantage of their learning strategies in English and transfer their learning strategies into their LOTE learning process. Based on the findings of the study, it is argued that LOTE students can be empowered to enhance their language proficiency by LOTE in the process of investment learning English and their investment can help them acquire additional multilingual ability and multiple identities. The study can prove pedagogical implications for curriculum of LOTE.

Keywords: English, language investment, empowerment, LOTE

1. Introduction

The policy of B & R (China's Belt and Road Initiative) and "going out" have accelerated LOTE into a revitalization since 2013. By March 23th, this year, statistics from Liu (2022) show that China had cooperated with over 149 countries on B & R. In order to fulfill the mission of China's policy, B & R, there is a great need for LOTE personnel. Thus, education of LOTE catches the attention of the mass and scholars both in domestic and overseas. However, existing research on LOTE tend to focus on macro aspects like language planing and policy of LOTE, training mode of LOTE or micro aspects like LOTE learners' language motivation and choice. These existing research are mainly about LOTE, paying attention to LOTE language learning. However, research ignore one important aspect, LOTE learners' English proficiency. In the context of globalization and English imperialism (Zhang & Song, 2022), English still cannot be replaced. English has a great impact on educational policies as a hyper-center language (Nunan, 2003). Piller (2003) said that the mindset that English has become a global language is adopted by non-English speaking world, which reflects a social stereotype (Zhang & Song, 2022). In China, LOTE learners are required to have English class in their first year and second year in University. So, the curriculum of LOTE also includes English courses. Students who majoring in LOTE can not get rid of "English learning" in the context of globalization propelling English as lingua franca. Thus, this study draw on Norton's Investment theory to analyze how LOTE learners in Chinese border university value and investment in English. By using semi-structured interviews method, this study pay attention to LOTE students' experiences of learning English at border university. The present study can provide some implications for English curriculum of LOTE.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research on LOTE in China

With the implementation of B & R, language other than English play important role in linking China and other country. Increasing studies on LOTE have emerged in recent decades. Most of research on LOTE highlight motivation by using cognitive approach and also pay attention to cultivation mode of LOTE. Lu & Shen issues an article about LOTE students' perceptions and choice of two different languages, English and non-English from the view of linguistic market (Lu & Shen, 2021). They emphasizes that LOTE learners regard English as a requisite, and a default choice, while LOTE are perceived as a plus, an extra choice (Xue, Pang, Zhang, & Yang, 2022). Zheng and Liu explores multilingual motivation of Chinese students and linguistic variations, emphasizing that the greatest motivation for Chinese students to choose a LOTE is learning experience, followed by cultural interest and hope for self-distinction (Zheng & Liu, 2021). In accordance with the requirements of the implementation of B & R, focus on non-English talent training gradually towards internationalization. How to understand the current situation of talent training and reasonable planning of talent reserve and training mode under the background of current small language talent education become the top priority (He, Shan & Huang, 2020). Zhang analyses the challenges confronting in LOTE education, like a lack of planning for language opening, insufficient establishment of national shortage languages, blind construction of some languages, and insufficiency of "top talent" in 2017 (Xue, Pang, Zhang, & Yang, 2017), then he put up with solutions for cultivation mode of LOTE.

Most of these studies have enriched our knowledge about LOTE education in east of China and offered insights into the LOTE learners' motivation and cultivation mode of LOTE. However, few of these studies shed light on aspect of LOTE learners in China's frontier. Li (2020) explores peripheral language learners and the romance of Thai with two examples of mediated language learning in China's frontier. Lin (2019) focus on students' experiences in language learning in China' frontier, however, few study pay attention to English learning experience of LOTE students in China's frontier.

2.2 Previous Studies on Language Investment in Foreign Language Learning

Most of study on language investment are mainly about English language learners' investment in English in the era of English as Lingual Franca. For example, Soltanian and Ghapanchi (2021) uses the construct of investment to to explore the factors affect Iranian English language learners' investment in English. Teng conducted a study on Chinese college English major students and explored the way three Chinese college English major students negotiated and navigated identity in the process of English learning (Teng, 2019). Lu & Shen (2021) argues that LOTE students' values and choice towards LOTE and English from the view of linguistic market. They also emphasizes that LOTE learners values and choice towards two different language. This actually illustrates English imperialism in LOTE education (Xue, Pang, Zhang, & Yang, 2022).

In addition, studies on language investment are mainly about immigrants' investment in English language learning. Lee (2017) studied the language investments of Korean immigrant in the U.S. and their multiple dynamic identities in the process of learning English (Lee, 2017). Zhang Fan (2021) has investigated the language fluency problems of skilled immigrants from mainland China to Canada conducted by Bourdieu's (1984) theory. The study reports the informants' difficulty in integrating into their workplaces and their unwillingness to make considerable investments in learning English (Zhang, 2021).

Previous studies on Language investment tend to focus on EFL learners' investment in English language learning and and also pay attention to immigrants' language investment in English in the context of English imperialism. However, how LOTE learners learn English in the era of globalization and English as lingua franca is rarely investigated. LOTE language personnel not only need to proficiency in language skill in LOTE but also have to study English in the era of globalization. Thus, the present study aims at exploring undergraduates' investment in English learning in border area. The research questions are as follow:

- 1) How do LOTE students perceive the values of English at China's frontier ?
- 2) How do Chinese LOTE students transfer their capitals in the process of learning English ?

3. Language Investment as Theoretical Framework

In this study, we draw on Bonny Norton's investment theory as theoretical framework, paying attention to LOTE learners' investments in English at a border university. Conception of Language investment was first posed by Bonny Norton in her article Social Identity, Investment, and Language Learning (Norton, 1995). Norton investigated immigrant language learners for a long time and collect data of immigrants' language use. She found the theorists of SLA difficult to conceptualize the world language learners and the relationship between

the social, because they have not developed an integrated social identity theory in the integration of language learners' language learning environment (Norton, 1995). Then she came up with the conception of "investment". From Norton's interpretation, investment can connect language learner with social identity in the shifting time and space (Norton, 1995). Since conception of investment was posed by Norton, Norton has continued to the investment theory in the context of globalization. Darwin and Norton (2015) continued to update the investment theory and highlight the importance of sociopolitical and socioeconomic discourses from macro perspective. Then they constructed the model of investment (figure 1). Darwin and Norton (2015) mentioned that learners invest in language because they can acquire more cultural capital and social power they desire through symbolic capital and material they have posses. This model can explain how identity, investment, and language learning interact (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Therefore, the present study draw on language investment theory to examine relationship between LOTE learners' identities and language learning at Chinese border university.



Figure 1. Model of investment

4. Methodology

4.1 Border University as Research Site



Figure 2. Location of Yunnan (source from Wikipedia)

This study aim to investigate English language learning experience of LOTE learners at Chinese frontier in the context of English as global language. In order to examine frontier's LOTE students' investments in English, we chose a border university as research site, which is located in Yunnan province (Figure 2), China's frontier. This border university play important role in linking China and South and Southeast Asia. It has cultivated many LOTE personnel. It also has established eight LOTE majors, such as Myanmar, Vietnamese, Thai, Laos, Hindi, Malay, Sinhalese, Bengali, and established these LOTE degree programs for many years. Among them, Myanmar, Thai, Hindi, Vietnamese majors in this university have become China's first-class majors. However, these LOTE majors curriculum is composed by major courses and foreign language course (English). LOTE learners in this university are required to have English class in their first year and second year, at least three semester. Though China's Frontier has limited resources of English compared with the area in East of China

caused by geographic and the educational gap between West and East of China, LOTE learners in Chinese border university have to learn English in their first three semester in university. Because, personnel linking China and South, Southeast Asian not only proficiency in LOTE, but also have to possess English language skill in the context of Globalization and English as global language. Thus, it is necessary to study how LOTE learners value and learn English in an English under-resourced context.

4.2 Participants

The 7 participants are second-year and third-year undergraduate students from different LOTE departments in the same border university, including Vietnamese, Thai, Myanmar and Hindi. These three South and Southeast Asian language departments in this border university were chosen because they are renowned for long-standing education in China’ frontier. So, These departments are representative and suitable for our research. All participants have studied their target language for at least two years, at the same time, they have finished all required English course in their university life. Therefore, their target language and English learning experience may shape their identity in the learning process. It also suitable for our research that how LOTE learners learn English in a English under-resourced context in the era of English as global language. These participants have different information. They are multilingual in Chinese, target language (LOTE) and English. The information is shown at the following Table. it’s worth noting that Participant D has transferred his major from English major to Thai major.

Table 1. Participants’ information

Participants	Gender (Male / Female)	Major	(LOTE) proficiency	English proficiency	When started learning English
P1	F	Vietnamese	TEM 8	CET-6	Elementary school
P2	F	Vietnamese	TEM 8	CET-6	Elementary school
P3	F	Thai	TEM 8	CET-6	Elementary school
P4	M	Thai	TEM 8	CET-6	Elementary school
P5	F	Hindi	TEM 8	CET-6	Elementary school
P6	F	Myanmar	TEM 8	CET-6	Elementary school

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis



Figure 3. English textbook used by participants from Tao Bao

The author spent three weeks to have English lesson with participants after receiving permission from their English teachers and becoming familiar to the students during 2021-2022 academic year by using methods of semi-structured interviews and interaction online. After having English lesson with students, the author gets some information about the students’ English learning situation. There are at least three semester English courses in their programme design, three courses per week and students can choose English teacher in course selection system at the beginning of every semester. The English textbook for these LOTE participants are *New Horizon*

(see figure 3), including reading and writing, viewing, listening and speaking. The author has face to face interview with the participants every month at least half an hour. After collecting data, the author categorizes the data into different parts according to the themes: values towards English, difficulties and ways to overcome difficulties. Then the author focus on interconnections of these different parts. Following are interviewing questions:

- 1) What do you think of English?
- 2) Do you think it is necessary to learn English as a student majoring in LOTE?
- 3) What challenges are you confronting in learning English?
- 4) How do you overcome difficulties of English learning?
- 5) How many hours per week you have spent in learning English?

5. Findings

5.1 LOTE Learners' Benefits About Learning English

Since China joined in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and held the 2008 Olympic Games successfully, China began to encourage English as the medium of instruction in education. According to Ingrid Pillar (2016), she draws on global-language system pyramid (see Figure 4) to show that there exists linguistic hierarchy of world languages. In this language pyramid, it can be seen that English is in the the peak of the pyramid, as 'hyper-central language' (Pillar, 2016). From this global-language system pyramid, it can be seen that LOTE like Myanmar, Thai, Vietnamese, Hindi are peripheral languages. English as global language has great impact on education policies and practice (Nunan, 2003), linguistics imperialism became a structure force urging people to learn English. Based on the context of English as hyper-central language, Students majoring in LOTE lean English can acquire benefits for their future life.

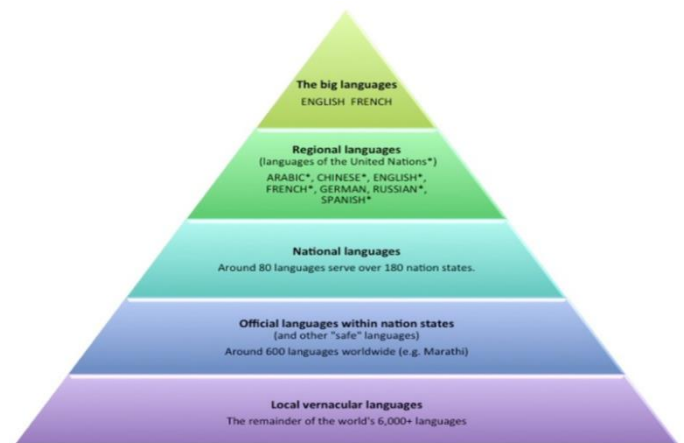


Figure 4. Global-language system pyramid from Wikipedia

5.1.1 Opportunities of Good Job and Studying Abroad

First, they can meet the requirement of English proficiency in market. LOTE students are confronting the challenge that most of jobs have required CET-4 or CET-6 though they are students of LOTE majors(see Figure 5). Students who have reached the level of CET-4, CET-6 or other certificates can proof their English proficiency can get more opportunity to get the satisfying job. Second, learning English have opportunity to study abroad. Participant E who majoring in Hindi has got a chance to study abroad. She told the author that according to CSC (China Scholarship Council), one of the requirements to study abroad is English proficiency. So her investment in English language learning gave her a "good return". From these two aspects, it can be found that LOTE students can acquire benefits from English learning.

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<p>【招聘职位】 小语种海外销售业务</p> <p>【岗位职责】</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1、负责客户项目跟进和管理，及时发现问题并解决问题； 2、负责客户订单接单，下单，跟进生产、发货、收款等全流程管理； 3、负责客户日常沟通、客户接待、会谈安排等； 4、协助部门/区域负责人制定/实施有建设性的营销策略，拓展市场和客户。 <p>【岗位要求】</p> <p>【必备项】</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1、本科及以上学历，<u>英语优先六级及以上</u>，英语可作为工作语言； 2、精通一门小语种（日语、韩语、德语、法语、俄语、西班牙语、印地语、阿拉伯语等），且所学语种听说读写流利； 3、具备优秀的业务开拓能力，具有开拓精神，积极进取，愿意接受挑战； <p>加分项：</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1、大型社团运营经验； 2、学生活动的组织者； 3、有大型家电或互联网企业海外销售实习经验； 4、有海外留学、实践经验； 	<p>教育：</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1、学历要求：大学本科及以上学历； 2、专业要求：电子商务、计算机技术、网络、通信、软件工程等相关3T专业优先，<u>或具备英语、日语、韩语、泰语等语言类相关专业基础。</u> <p>技能：</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1、具有较好的市场开发意识，能及时挖掘客户需求，独立完成市场拓展任务； 2、具备基本的电信业务、信息技术、项目管理、财务知识基础； 3、专业知识扎实，具备良好的语言表达能力、逻辑思维能力和较强的协调能力和统筹管理能力； 4、工作积极主动、责任心强，具备良好的团队意识； 5、<u>通过大学英语六级或相当水平英语认证</u>，具备良好的英文或其他语言的谈判、翻译能力者优先。 <p>经验：</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1、有外部销售经验者优先； 2、校招无经验需求/社招要求具有2年以上相关工作经验。

Figure 5. Requirement of English proficiency in job market

5.1.2 Acquire Multiple Identities in the Process of Learning English

In Norton's (2013) work, identity is multiple and struggle, and changing (David & Norton, 2015). Students learning English projecting multiple identities across time and space. For example, students can make friends online with people all over the world by English text-massage, and using English in their work, such as bilingual (LOTE and English) interpreter. what's more, students can acquire academic excellence by English can be a pioneer in LOTE fields. These multiple identities are crossing time and space, and determined by high expectation of LOTE.

5.2 Capitals in the Process of Learning English

From the benefits mentioned above and participants' interviews, it is obvious that students majoring in LOTE value English because of benefits they could gain. These benefits actually are "capitals", one of the elements shaping the model of investment. For Bourdieu (1986), capitals have many forms: economic, cultural, symbolic, and social capital. More specifically, students value English as an economic capital, because it can bring them opportunities of good jobs and financial resources. Besides, learning English is valued as a cultural capitals. They regard the English language as a key, an effective way to open the gate of study abroad, which is an cultural capitals. If they are proficiency in English, they can make friends and accumulate social capital. Thus, students' investments in English are shaped by different forms of capitals. However, they can also gain capitals in the process of learning English. For example, they can acquire addictive multilingual ability. From the data, it can be found that learning English is not an act of consumption, but an act of gaining addictive multilingual ability though English and LOTE are quite different, which quite differ from traditional views that English and LOTE are conflicting. Participant B shares the same strategies in learning Vietnamese and English. She even said "learning English can help me learn Vietnamese, because English grammar is very clear, which can help me understand the meanings of Vietnamese sentence." Participant D also make friends with Vietnamese, they often learn English together. From these perspective, capitals play important role in process of LOTE students' English learning.

5.3 Ideology in Language Investment

5.3.1 Positive Perceptions Towards English Because of High Expectations on LOTE

Perceptions of most of our LOTE participants towards English are positive. Students' investments in English show that they have positive perception though they are confronted with difficulties when they learn English and hope they can have good English proficiency. The following words of students can show their positive perceptions towards English.

When I saw my friends who majoring in English stand on the stage at an English speech contest, I really envy my friends because they can speak English very well, and I hope I can like them one day, so now I still make efforts to practice my oral English and improve my English proficiency. If I have a good proficiency in English, I can introduce my Target language (LOTE)'s culture in English at Cross-culture competence competition. And also can do some LOTE academic research in English. (Interview with A, 10/6/2022)

I transferred English major to Thai major not because I hate English, but I'm more interested in Thai. I still spent times on learning English, and hope to be a multilingual personnel, but my target language Thai occupied most of the time because I want to be a "top talent" in this field (LOTE) in future so that I can serve for our country. (Interview with B, 14/6/2022)

From these interviews, it can be seen our participants have positive perceptions towards English learning, it seems that English imperialism influence their values of English, however, students learn English because of high expectation of LOTE. Previous research tend to focus on English imperialism in LOTE, however, it is not wise to taking learning English as a act reflecting English imperialism. Actually, Students learning English because of their high expectation of LOTE, they believe LOTE can bring them bright future, English just a multilingual skill serving for LOTE, for example, English can make them read English materials related to LOTE easier and acquire academic excellence in LOTE fields. This language ideology is determined by the rising of China. It can be regarded as a breakthrough of linguistic imperialism.

6. Discussion

The paper has studied LOTE learners' investments in English at a Chinese border university by using Norton's language investment theory. The present study reveals how students learn English in a English under-resourced context and demonstrate that students' investments in English because of capitals of economic, cultural and social. Students can also acquire capitals, addictive multilingual ability and multiple identities in the process of learning English. However, students majoring in LOTE learn English because they have high expectations towards LOTE, which determined by the rising comprehensive national strength of China. Thus, the study demonstrate students are empowered by LOTE in their process of learning English, which is a breakthrough of linguistic imperialism.

7. Conclusion

This present study focus on LOTE students' investments in English at China's frontier. In the era of English as lingual franca, students who majoring in LOTE are required to learn English at least three semester in this border university. So, it is necessary to investigate students' investments in English in China's frontier. Drawing on Norton's investment theory, the study reveals that students lean English because of capitals and language ideology, and they can project multiple identities in the process of learning English. Capitals, ideology and identities shape students' investment in English. What the most important point is that students are empowered by LOTE in their process of learning English, which is a breakthrough of linguistic imperialism. This study also provide pedagogical implications for English curriculum of LOTE.

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