

**The Influence of English Learning on Ethnic Kazakh Minority Students' Identity  
(re)Construction at Chinese Universities**

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**Abstract****The Influence of English Learning on Ethnic Kazakh Minority Students' Identity  
(re)Construction at Chinese Universities**

Language learning researches have shed light on the learners' identity shifts through the language practices in which the power relations negotiated as the language learner invest in the cultural capital to increase both material and symbolic power of the target language as well as to be part of imagined community. English language is perceived as cultural capital in many non-native English speaking countries and minority groups in these social contexts seem to invest in the language to be empowered and reposition themselves from the imbalanced power relation with dominant group. This study devoted to explore how English learning influence minority Kazakh students' identity (re)construction at Chinese universities from the scope of 'imagined community, investment and identity' theory of Norton (2013). To this end the three research questions were designed as following: 1) Kazakh minority students' English learning experiences at Chinese universities; 2) Kazakh minority students' views about benefits and opportunities of English learning; 3) the influence of English learning on Kazakh minority students' identity (re)construction. The study employs interview-based qualitative research method by interviewing nine Kazakh minority students in universities in Xinjiang and other inland cities in China. The findings suggest that through English learning, some students have reconstructed multiple identities as multicultural and global identities, which created 'a third space' to break limits of their ethnic and national identities and confused identity as someone in-between. Meanwhile, most minority students were empowered by English language to resist inferior or marginalized position and reconstruct imagined elite identity. However, English learning disempowered student who has little previous English education in school,

and placed them on unequal footing with other students, which further escalated the educational inequities. These findings imply that substantial supports in terms of offering extra English courses to minority students at universities and enhance English provision at minority schools are essential to promote educational equity, human capital investment as well as social cohesion.



## Абстракт

### Ағылшынтілін үйренудің Қытай университеттеріндегі азсанды этникалық қазақтардың жеке тұлға ретінде қалыптасуына ықпалы

Тіл үйрену тақырыбына жасалған зерттеулер тілдік практиканың үйренушілердің тұлғалық өзгерістері жайлы түсінік беретінін анықтады, өйткені шет тілін оқитын студент мәдени капиталға, тілдің материалдық және символикалық күштерін арттыруға, сондай-ақ қиялдағы қоғамдастықтың бөлігі болу үшін инвестиция жасайды. Ағылшын тілі ағылшын тілінде сөйлемейтін көптеген елдерде мәдени капитал ретінде қабылданады, ал осы әлеуметтік контексттердегі аз санды топтар шет тілін меңгеруге инвестиция жасайды және басым топпен теңгерілмеген энергетикалық қарым-қатынастардан қайта топтастырылады. Бұл зерттеу ағылшын тілін үйренудің Нортонның «Көрнекі қауымдастық, инвестиция және сәйкестік» (2013) теориясының шеңберінде Қытайдың жоғары оқу орындарындағы қазақ этникалық тобы студенттері арасында жеке тұлғаны қалыптастыруға әсерін талдауға арналған. Осы зерттеу барысында келесі үш өзекті мәселе талқыланды: 1) Қазақ этникалық топтарының Қытайдың жоғары оқу орындарындағы ағылшын тілін үйренудегі тәжірибесі; 2) Қазақ этникалық топтарының ағылшын тілін үйренудің артықшылықтары мен мүмкіншіліктері жайлы көзқарастары; 3) Ағылшын тілін үйренудің Қазақ этникалық топтарының тұлға ретінде қалыптасуына әсері. Зерттеу барысында тоғыз Синдзян және ішкі Қытайдың қалаларындағы аз санды қазақ ұлты студенттері қатысқан сұқпатқа негізделген сапалық анализ қолданылды. Зерттеулер көрсеткендей, ағылшын тілін үйренудің арқасында бірқатар оқушылар өз бойларында көпмәдениетті және ғаламдық тұлғалар қалыптастырып, өздерінің этникалық және ұлттық ерекшеліктерін еңсеру үшін «үшінші кеңістікті» құрған, және өздерін аралық тұлға ретінде қалыптартырған. Сонымен қатар ағылшын тілін үйрену көптеген аз санды студенттердің төмен және шеттетілген қоғамдық топтардан асып шығып, қиялдағы элиталы топқа қосылуына септігін тигізген. Дегенмен, ағылшын тілін оқып үйрену барысында, ағылшын тілінде мектепте ағылшын сабақ алу тәжірибесі аз студенттерден басқа оқушылар басым түсіп, бұл білім берудегі теңсіздікті одан әрі

тереңдете түсті. Бұл мәліметтер университеттердегі аз санды студенттерге қосымша ағылшын тілін оқыту және этникалық аз санды ұлттарға арналған мектептерде ағылшын тілінің деңгейін арттыру секілді маңызды қолдаулар білім берудегі, адами капиталға инвестициялауда және әлеуметтік бірлікті нығайтуда маңызды рөл атқарады.

## Абстракт

### **Влияние изучения английского языка на образования личности этнических казахских меньшинств в китайских университетах**

Исследования языкового обучения проливают свет на развитие личности учеников посредством языковой практики, в которых устанавливаются властные отношения согласовываются, так как человек, изучающий язык, инвестирует в культурный капитал, чтобы увеличить как материальную, так и символическую ценность целевого языка, а также быть частью воображаемого сообщества. Английский язык воспринимается как культурный капитал во многих странах, в которых английский не является родным, и группы меньшинств в данных социальных слоях, вкладывают средства в изучение языка, чтобы получить возможность и изменить свое положение в отношениях с доминирующей группой. Данное исследование посвящено изучению того, как знание английского языка влияет на самовосприятие казахских этнических меньшинств в университетах Китая на основании «Теории воображаемого сообщества, инвестиций и идентичности» Нортон (2013). С этой целью мною были разработаны три предмета исследования: 1) Опыт изучения английского языка казахскими студентами в университетах Китая; 2) Мнения казахских студентов о преимуществах и возможностях, возникающих при изучении английского языка; 3) Влияние изучения английского языка на образование личности студентов из казахских этнических меньшинств. В исследовании используется метод качественного анализа, основанного на интервью, путем опроса девяти казахских студентов из числа меньшинств в университетах Синьцзяна и других городов внутреннего Китая. Полученные данные показывают, что благодаря изучению английского языка некоторые студенты образовали в себе множественные личности как мультикультурные и глобальные, которые создали «третье пространство» для того, чтобы выйти за рамки своих этнических и национальных принадлежностей и преобразовали себя в нечто среднее. Между тем, изучение английского языка помогло большинству студентов из числа меньшинств преодолеть низкое или маргинальное положение в обществе и приобщиться к воображаемой элитной группе. Тем не менее, при изучении английского языка ученики с небольшим опытом обучения английскому в школе уступали другим

студентам, что еще больше обострило неравенство в образовании. Эти данные свидетельствуют о том, что предоставление дополнительных курсов английского языка студентам из числа меньшинств в университетах и повышение уровня английского языка в школах для этнических меньшинств оказывает существенную поддержку и имеет важное значение для обеспечения равенства в образовании, инвестиций в человеческий капитал, а также социальной сплоченности.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

Identity construction and second language learning has been an important topic for research during recent two decades (Mitsikopoulou, 2002). Language is used for learners to express themselves and communicate with others, but at the same time, they negotiate their sense of identity, how they understand their relationships to the world and future possibilities (Norton, 2013). Language learners' relationship to the world also reflects how they negotiate power relations in certain social context. As described by Glastra and Schedler(as cited in Zhao, 2010)“Language is not simply a medium of communication but also reflects power relations” (p. 70). In many social contexts, minority groups seem to be in imbalanced power relations within dominant society (Cummins, 2015), and how they negotiate this power relations through learning the second or third language and how their sense of identities shift during the process is an intriguing research field.

The impact of globalization and internationalization has consolidated the status of the English language as the global language for international communications. Besides, English is considered to be the most prestige language as the majority of cutting-edge information and publications related to science and technology is in English (Pennycook, 2017). Thus, in many non-native English speaking countries, English is the second language to be learned from primary or secondary school, and perceived as the cultural capital with paramount material and symbolic values (Bourdieu, 1986). Particularly in China, with increased active participation of China in the international arena, the English language is regarded as a ‘passport’ not only for individual prospective educational and career opportunities, but also for national economic development and modernization (Hu, 2005).



In 2001, the Ministry of Education in China has issued three policy documents to promote the English language education; it is stipulated that schools have started to teach English language as a subject from primary grade 3 from 2002, and English competence is a requirement for the admission to higher education institutions in China (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2001a). However, contrasting to the solid tone for English provision at mainstream schools, the policy document issued in 2002 stating with implicit tone that “the relationship between the minority language and the Mandarin Chinese should be correctly managed...English should be offered in regions where favorable conditions exist” (State Council, 2002, as cited in Feng & Sunuodula, 2009, p. 687).

Some studies have revealed that limited provision of English education at minority schools in western regions, and challenges encountered by minority students when they entered the universities that they were placed on unequal footing with ethnic Chinese students (Adamson & Xia, 2011; Guo & Gu, 2016). It also reflects the unbalanced power relations between the dominant ethnic Chinese and minority groups within the social context. Some studies carried out in international contexts, found that minority students are highly motivated to acquire the English language to resist the unbalanced power to reposition themselves and negotiate their sense of identity (Darvin & Norton, 2016; Despaigne, 2015; Groff, Pilote, & Vieux-Fort, 2016; M. Gu & Patkin, 2013).

China is a multiethnic country, and it has fifty-six officially recognized ethnic groups including ethnic Chinese (Han ethnic) as the dominant group and fifty-five ethnic minorities. Apart from Hui and Manchu who speaks the Chinese language as native languages, other ethnic minorities in China have own native languages which are different from the Chinese language. Ethnic Kazakh is one of the ethnic minorities in China, and it is estimated that there

are around 1.5 million Kazakh people settled in China (Linzhu et al., 2011). The majority of ethnic Kazakh minority lives in Xinjiang Autonomous Region in China (Xinjiang). And as the second largest minority group after Uyghur people in Xinjiang, ethnic Kazakh have been recognized by their distinctive language, religion, and traditions from ethnic Chinese (Han people). They mainly located in northern parts of Xinjiang (like Altai, Tarbagatay, Ili, and Urumqi).

In general, there are two types of educational programs dedicated for ethnic Kazakh students to obtain the primary and secondary education in Xinjiang. The first type is to attend mainstream schools (*min kao han*) the same as ethnic Chinese students, the medium of instruction is Chinese and English is a compulsory subject at this type of school. The second type is to attend ethnic bilingual schools (*min kao min*) where the majority of subjects used to be taught in Kazakh and Chinese is taught as a subject. The education reform has been taken in recent years in these ethnic bilingual schools in Xinjiang, that the medium of instruction is replaced by Chinese, and minority language is being learned as a subject (Jian, 2017).

For some minority groups in Xinjiang, like Kazakh, Uyghur, and Mongols, the trilingual education is claimed to be initiated in ethnic bilingual schools, that by adding the English language as a compulsory subject. However, some studies also point out that English provision is still limited in most bilingual schools due to lack of resources as well as qualified teachers, and “inconsistency among national, regional and local policies implementation” (Adamson & Feng, 2009, p. 256; Feng & Sunuodula, 2009). It is important to note that the majority of these studies have focused on ethnic Uyghur minority groups, whereas ethnic Kazakh minority has gained little attention. Moreover, most studies in the field of minority education in China have only focused on language education policy and the provision of

mother tongue and English education in ethnic minority schools. For instance, Tsung and Cruickshank (2009) drew on data of Uyghur and Kazakh minority classes in one mixed minority school in Xinjiang and found that both classes lacked adequate acquisition of mother tongue and English education. Similarly, studies (Adamson & Feng, 2009; Adamson & Xia, 2011) focused mainly on the language education policy for minority students at schools and universities and concurred that minority students are placed at the disadvantaged place in terms of limited provision of English education at schools. However, up to now, far too little attention has been paid to understand how the limited provision of English education impact on minority students' learning experiences in universities where they were placed on an unequal footing with other students.

As mentioned above, in nowadays, English is perceived as the cultural capital in many non-native English speaking countries and taught as the second or third language in schools. A number of studies have begun to explore the influence of English language learning on students' identity (re)construction. M. M. Gu and Tong (2012) found that students at one English-medium university in Hong Kong reconstructed their identities as a global citizen through learning in English and claimed themselves to be closely connected to the outside world. In the same vein, Despagne (2015) noted that minority students in Mexico made efforts in English learning in order to reconstruct the identity as modern people and perceived English would bring more opportunities to reposition themselves from the marginalized position within dominant society. Taken together, these studies support the notion that English language learning empowered learners with increased cultural capital to reposition and reconstructed the global identity as well as imagined to be part of a global community.

Therefore, this study attempts to contribute to the growing area of research and aims to explore the relationship between identity (re)construction and English learning that how minority Kazakh students negotiate the sense of identity and adjust the power relations within dominant society in the Chinese context.

### **The Statement of Problem**

It is argued that limited English provision at minority bilingual schools has placed ethnic minority students at unequal footing with ethnic Chinese students at Chinese universities (Adamson & Feng, 2009). Moreover, all students at Chinese universities are required to pass the College English Test (known as CET, is test for English proficiency of Bachelor's Degree conferral at universities in China) in order to obtain the degree and pursue further studies like master and doctoral degrees; some studies revealed that the low proficiency of English language has detrimental impact on minority students' academic performance, personality development, integration into mainstream culture, interpersonal communication, participations during class, and upward social mobility (Adamson & Feng, 2009; Adamson & Xia, 2011).

On the other hand, English learning seems to empower the minority groups to reposition themselves within unequal power relations between dominant groups in many social contexts. Moreover, minority students have been found to have higher motivation to learn English language, they value their own native language for the benefit of learning English, and they reconstruct identities as educated elite, global citizen through learning English (Despaigne, 2015; Guo & Gu, 2016; Groff, et al., 2016). For instance, Guo and Gu (2016) noted that Uyghur students in Chinese universities are passionate at English learning and reconstructed their identities as multicultural identity and elite identity. However, Guo

and Gu (2016)'s data are limited to minority students of privileged background from big cities rather than those from remote and small towns in Xinjiang, where the accessibility to English education are found to be limited in minority schools as mentioned before. This discrepancy of background might contribute to different English learning experiences and therefore have an influence on the identity (re)construction.

Surprisingly, almost all previous studies on minority education in Xinjiang have been devoted to Uyghur people whereas very little detailed investigation on Kazakh minority students' learning experiences. The study of Tsung and Cruickshank (2009) included Kazakh students in one mixed minority schools in Aksu Xinjiang but focused only on the provision of mother tongue and English education in this school. As Feng (2012) proposed the question that English provision at Kazakh minority schools might be different from Uyghur schools. Thus, the detailed understanding of Kazakh minority students' English learning experiences might offer different insights from the Uyghur students' experiences.

Within the broad topic of relationship between second language learning and identity (re)construction, this study attempts to understand Kazakh minority students' English learning experiences at Chinese universities, and how English learning influenced their identity (re)construction.

### **The Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

Based on the conceptual framework offered by Norton (2013) as "Imagined community, investment, and identity", the present study aims at exploring the influence of English language learning on Kazakh minority students' identity (re)construction at Chinese universities.

The key research questions that guided the study are as follows:

1. What are English language learning experiences of minority Kazakh students at Chinese universities?
2. How do Kazakh minority students view the benefits of the English language learning?
3. How do Kazakh students perceive the impact of English language learning on their identity (re)construction?

### **The Significance of the Study**

It is hoped that this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of minority students' English learning experiences at Chinese universities and how their identities shift through the acquisition of the cultural capital to negotiate the power relations within the dominant society. Thus, for students themselves, the study might enable them to reflect on their own learning experiences and get a deeper insight into tentative identity shifts in this learning process. The study also suggests some implications for policymakers, university administrators and teachers for providing additional support in terms of allocating adequate resources at minority bilingual schools, balancing the educational inequity issues, acknowledging and encouraging minority students' linguistic and cultural diversities. Given the empowerment by the international language, ethnic minority students contribute to the human capital for the social and economic development of the country, and at the same time to maintain the long-term social cohesion within a multiethnic and multicultural country.

### **The Structure of the study**

The overall structure of the study takes the form of six chapters, including the introductory chapter, which provides the background of the study, and statement of the

problem, the purpose of the study as well as research questions and the significance of the study. Chapter Two begins by laying out the concepts and conceptual framework of research reviews the existing studies on the influence of language on the identity construction and provides the context of the study. The third chapter is concerned with the methodology used for the study to illustrate the rationales for qualitative design and interview as the research method, the sampling strategy, data collection and analyzing processes, and ethical issues. The fourth chapter presents the findings of the research, focusing on the six major themes based on main research questions. Chapter Five interprets and discussed the findings within the scope of a conceptual framework and previous studies. The last chapter, conclusion, summarizes the findings, states the limitations of the study and provides the recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

This study attempts to understand the influence of English language learning on minority Kazakh students' identity (re)construction at universities in China. In order to fully understand the dynamic and variable interaction among language learning, identity construction and other related factors, research questions include minority Kazakh students' experiences of learning English at the tertiary level, their views about the benefits and opportunities of English learning, and the impact of English learning on their identity (re)construction.

The following chapter provides the existing studies related to the topic of the present study. It begins with introducing the key concepts throughout the whole study, like the ethnic minority, identity (re)construction, and learning experiences. Then it explicates the conceptual framework of the study, which is 'Imagined community, Investment and Identity construction' by Norton (2013). Further, the chapter provides the existing studies on the impact of second language learning on identity (re)construction, and related studies about the influence of English learning on minority students' identity (re)construction in the international context. Finally, it offers the context of the study in terms of English education in general and for ethnic minorities in China, and minority students' English learning experiences at Chinese universities.

### **Concepts**

In order to provide the clear and consistent understandings of the main concepts of the study, this section is going to offer the analyses of the concepts like ethnic minority, identity construction and reconstruction, and learning experiences, and clarify the definite meaning or particular scope of the concepts which is going to be employed in this study.



**Ethnic minority.** The concept of ethnic minority has been understood broadly by two different meanings: the first line of studies defines the term by identifying the group of people who shared the same culture, lifestyle, history and origin, that the group is minority in terms of numeric size compared with the majority group and interchangeable with the term of 'ethnic group' (Burton, Nandi, & Platt, 2008; May, 2013; Paniagua, 2004). The second line of studies emphasizes on the numeric size of the ethnic minority with its lower social status and discrimination, in other words, the issue of "social inequality...the social essence of ethnic minorities resulting from oppression or stigmatization" (Volkov, 2010, p. 100). This also reflects the unbalanced power relations existing among the dominant group and minority groups that the minority groups are found to be at the inferior or marginalized position.

In the present study, ethnic minority Kazakh is one of fifty-five officially recognized ethnic minorities in China, as Chinese Communist Party defined in 2005 (as cited in Linzhu et al., 2011) that ethnic group is,

"...a historically constituted, stable community of people who, in general, share common characteristics of historical origins, mode of production, language, culture, customs, and a sense of solidarity; for some minorities, religion also plays an important role in their formation and development process (p. 8)."

Although the above definition is consistent to the first line of study that defines the ethnic minority from the objective features in terms of population, language, culture, and religion, this study attempts to shed light on identity (re)construction of minority people by involving the power relations within the social context. Therefore, the concept of ethnic minority employed in this study is based on the combination of these two lines of

understanding, which includes ethnic cultural, linguistic and religious distinctions and numeric sizes attached with inferior or marginalized social status.

**Learning experiences.** Studies about students' learning experiences have employed various scope of the lens to gain insights into the phenomenon of experience based on a related central issue of the study (Mingyue Gu, 2008; Qing, 2017; Sawir, 2005; Q. Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010; Wu, 2015). However, there are similarities in terms of identifying the themes discovered from students' learning experiences. For instance, the learning experiences had been explored from the perspectives of inside and outside academic settings in terms of teaching approaches as well as classroom participation in classroom learning (Sawir, 2005; Wu, 2015), and students' learning approaches outside classes. As Wu (2015) demonstrated that Chinese international students at British universities found that teaching approaches were quite different from their previous experiences in China. More specifically, teachers at British universities favored student-centered approach and organized the various group or individual work to develop their critical thinking abilities. Similarly, Sawir (2005) noted that students from Asian countries commented on their English class at home countries that classes were mainly teacher-centered and English teachers paid more attention to grammar and less on oral skills development. Both of these studies reflect that, with respect to the teaching style and approaches, students have quite different learning experiences in Asian and Western educational settings.

Apart from learning or teaching approaches, some studies explored the experiences through the lenses of positive and negative experiences (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010; Qing, 2017; Sawir, 2005). Qing (2017) has investigated the elite university learning experiences of students from rural areas and noted that most students had difficult adaptation

experiences in terms of academic study and students' social life during the initial years. These students had negative emotional experiences as they felt themselves like "Country Bumpkin in a big city" and they felt inferior to other students (p. 82). On the other hand, the opportunity to study in prestigious university was the honor for them and their families, they perceived this as the "luck" (p. 82). These positive and negative experiences resulted in conflicted feelings as they felt not accepted by the city and being proud to be 'city person' in home village. In the same vein, Gu et al. (2010) explored international students' learning experiences at British universities and classified their experiences into positive and negative experiences. Some students felt themselves "powerlessness" and "lack of a sense of belongingness" when they experiences the unfamiliar educational systems (p. 17), social structures and values, while some students found themselves adapted into the new culture and system and overcame challenges in terms of academic study and social life and they considered this as positive experience.

Based on these previous studies, this study also attempts to explore students' learning experiences through the lens of positive learning experiences and negative learning experiences regarding their challenges as well as gains in and outside classroom learnings at Chinese universities. Moreover, the minority students' English learning experiences in the international context will also be illustrated in further section.

**Identity construction and reconstruction.** As the study explores the issue of identity construction, it is essential to clarify the concept of identity and identity (re)construction. The concept of identity is viewed differently by scholars although they have some common relationships. According to Ha (as cited in Kouhpaenejad & Gholaminejad, 2014) that the identity is perceived by western scholars as "hybrid and multiple" while by eastern scholars as

“a sense of belonging” (p. 199). Meanwhile, identity has two controversial features: the identity is defined as the stable core self, which is unitary, fixed, and unchangeable from the viewpoint of essentialists; but based on poststructuralists' view, the identity is dynamic, fluid, diverse and changing through time and space.

The identity reflects a sense of the uniqueness of individual to be differentiated from others on one hand and refers to the groups which the individual belongs to emphasize the identification of belongingness on the other hand. Kouhpaenejad & Gholaminejad (2014) notes the dimensions of the identity are multiple and even contradictory, as “Joseph describes the process of identity construction likes a sword with two edges which can both work partially against individuals and connect them together” (p. 200). In addition, Kouhpaenejad & Gholaminejad (2014) argue that these two forces are “unifying and divisive forces”, and the later force is far more overweights the former one (p. 200). Therefore, the conflicts of identities might even increase as the individualness is distinct from the mainstream or dominant group.

Within personal dimension, the identity can be perceived as ‘who am I’, the “individual traits, characteristics and dispositions”(Edwards, 2009, p. 19). While in the dimension of social aspects, the identity is individual's sense of who they are “in terms of groups to which they belong, including ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, generation, sexual orientation, social class and an unlimited number of other possibilities” (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 25). The individual always has multiple identities in various contexts, and these identities are not predetermined but constantly changed and reconstructed by personal and environmental factors.

Based on poststructuralists' view of identity as fluid, dynamic and changeable across time and space, a line of studies in the field of applied linguistics have concurred that the identity is constructed, and reconstructed through language and discourse (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001; Kinginger, 2013; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Norton, 2013 & Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001) proposed that minority groups negotiated their identities through linguistic discourses in terms of code-switching, new linguistic varieties, and second language learning and reposition themselves within power relations in dominant society. In a similar vein, Kinginger (2013) suggested that the second language learner reconstructed the new identity as she or he invested in the language to become the part of the imagined community of target language. These studies clearly indicate that identity is inseparably connected to the language learning, in other words, the identity is not fixed, but fluid, interchangeable and negotiated through the linguistic discourse and practice within the social context.

In the present study, the notion of identity is based on poststructuralists' view, more specifically, defined by Norton (2013) as: "How a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 45). This definition takes into account that dynamic and interchangeable relationship between the language learner and identity construction and reconstruction. Meanwhile, it also allows for the possibilities of future as the individual imagine becoming a part of target community and therefore investing in the language learning, and negotiating the sense of self within power relations. The detailed explanation of the imagined community, investment, and identity construction will be presented in the following section.

### **Conceptual Framework: Imagined Community, Investment and Identity**

As this research attempts to understand the influence of English language on minority students' identity (re)construction, I found that Norton's theory (2013) of "Imagined community, investment, and identity" offered insights to understand the language learners' identity shifts within the power relation negotiations in social context of language learning.

Norton's theory is based on the second language learning motivation theory of Dörnyei (2009), which proposed the notion of individual identity. That an individual's identity as a language learner is perceived as personal psychological constructs, which consist of three main components that the Ideal L2 self, the Ought-to L2 self and, the L2 Learning experience. In other words, the individual's view of self, outside expectations, and environmental influences are considered to impact language learning motivation. Norton replaced the notion of *motivation* with that of *investment* to acknowledge the power negotiations within the language learning, extending the involvement of individual agency from a "psychological construct" to a "social construct" (Norton, 2015, p. 377). I employ the theory of imagined community, investment, and identity of Norton (2013) to conceptualize my study since I investigate identity shift through the language learning process that the power negotiations of the minority group within the dominant society by learning a globalized language.

The notion of 'Investment', based on the work of Bourdieu (1986), refers to an individual's desire and practice in the target language, which has the potential to enable the learner to "acquire a wider range of symbolic resources (language, education, friendship) and material resources (capital goods, real estate, money), which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital and social power" (p. 33). The possession of certain valued languages means that the individual owns access to related resources and opportunities which can be

converted into economic wealth. For instance, English is the language with symbolic power in the world nowadays as it is the language that carries the most economic, cultural and social capital. The individual who has competent knowledge of English means that he or she also has wider potentials to access the various resources compared with the counterpart who has little knowledge of English in a non-English speaking country. As stated by Norton (2008), the notion of investment perceives the language learner as “having a complex, non-unitary identity, changing across time and space, and reproduced in social interaction” (p. 48). Therefore, Norton proposes the notion that the individual's investment in the language learning can be perceived as the investment in the identity.

The notion of ‘imagined community’ is initially introduced in Anderson's work (Wilson & Anderson, 1985), as they indicate that the direct engagement is not the only way of belonging to the community since the individual will not know every member of the community even in the smallest nation, thus the imagination is another important way by which we feel the sense of belonging to the community and imagine the image of fellow citizens of the particular community. Norton extends the notion of “imagined community” to construct the framework of ‘imagined community, investment, and identity’. In her study, five immigrant women with various linguistic and social backgrounds all made effort to learn and acquire English language in order to gain the acceptance to the Canadian community, as Norton describes that “imagining ourselves bonded with our fellow citizens across time and space, we can feel a sense of community with people we have not yet met, but perhaps hope to meet one day” (p. 8). For instance, Mai, a Vietnamese immigrant woman, was eager to learn English for present and future since she believed that this language would promise the access to the imagined community where she would have a decent job. The imagined community will

encourage the individual to invest more in the certain linguistic capital, and more investment through the time will again strengthen the identity construction in the relation to the imagined community.

It is important to note that, the language learning in Norton's (2013) study is based on the context of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), which is different from foreign language learning setting. The five immigrant women in Norton's study learned the English language since the language was the dominant language in that society; in other words, the English language was prerequisite for participation in various social interactions. English language in many non-native English-speaking countries has been taught as a foreign language at school, and language learners have less exposure to the target language outside the classroom or learning settings (Kinging, 2013). However, there seem to be some similarities in both language learning paradigms that the identity is constructed and reconstructed with the learning process as more investment made in order to achieve the goal of being or recognized by 'imagined community member'. Moreover, the development of technology has transformed the traditional way of learning, as described by Darvin and Norton (2016) "learner traverse local and global boundaries, occupying multiple online and offline spaces, their capacity to identify and navigate systemic patterns of controls impact their investment in particular language and literacy practices" (p. 24). This also transformed language learners' ways of negotiating their identities while learning the language and thus participating in social interactions.

The study of Kinginger (2013) illustrates the French language learning journey of an American girl Alice, who was attracted by the French culture depicted in American culture production: "where France is presented as a vast formal garden studded with works of



monumental architecture”(p. 16). Along with symbolic value of this target language, Alice imagines herself as a French language instructor in the future, which will enable her access to the social, cultural and economic privilege that she has not enjoyed as a child. In this sense, Alice's investment in the French language is as same as the investment in Norton's (2013) study, which indicates that the more competence of the target language is gained the more the opportunities to access into the cultural and material resources; identity is negotiated in this process as linguistic and cultural competence is recognized and legitimized within a certain community and the individual's sense of himself or herself, as well as his or her relationship to the world is constantly changing through the time and space.

In view of all that has been mentioned so far, the present study is framed by the conceptual theory of 'Investment, Imagined community and Identity' (Norton, 2013). These three concepts explicate the interrelations between the English language learning and identity construction by involving the power relations negotiated within the social context. More specifically, by investing in English learning as acquiring the cultural capital, minority students might navigate the identity shifts as well as negotiate the power relations within dominant society. Additionally, I employ these concepts as analytical tools when I reviewed existing studies and analyzed my data. In order to better illustrate the influence of language learning on identity (re)construction, I have reviewed a wide range of international studies published within latest ten years and this is going to be presented in the following section.

### **Research about the Impact of Language Learning on the Identity (re)Construction**

Based on the post-structuralism's view of identity as the fluid, interchangeable and dynamic across the time and space, there is a large number of published studies (e.g. Anbreen, 2015; Gao, 2011; Rivas, 2013; Shin, 2010; Sung, 2014; Yu, Brown & Stephens, 2018) that

describe the influence of second or third language learning on the identity (re)construction. There is a consensus among these studies that the new language learning shape and reshape the individual's identity through multiple ways such as communication, socio-cultural and ideological influence; while this transformation process, to some extent, may differ between majority and minority groups since their home languages are recognized by the local context at different levels as well as other social and environmental influences.

As English has become the global language and the language which dominates the science, technology, information as well as business, the language becomes the most important foreign language in many non-native English speaking countries. Some studies find that through learning the English language as the second or foreign language, learners construct the new identity as global citizen and reflect on their own ethnic and national socio-cultural beliefs, which may help them to go beyond the linguistic and cultural boundaries and become more accepting to otherness (Gao, 2011; Sung, 2014). Students from Hong Kong universities showed their desire for obtaining the global identity which possesses some positive traits such as communicating with people of various cultural background and be open-minded to different cultures as well as beliefs (Sung, 2014). Interestingly, some participants hope not to be identified as local Hong Kong identity as they think that these labels are stereotypes and constraints while the global identity may enable them to break these limitations. Similarly, studies of Anbreen (2015) and Gao (2011) also report that Pakistani and Chinese students have reexamined their own attitudes and beliefs related to ethnic and national identities to reconstruct the new global identity which embraces and tolerates other different or even opposite views and beliefs. Vice versa, the English language learning not only impact on the formation of a new identity but also the imagined identity or belonging to the target

community may exert influence on the language learning itself. For instance, studies (Bouchereau Bauer, Guerrero, Hornberg, & Bos, 2015; Shin, 2010; Yu et al., 2017) imply that if learners have positive self-identity of belonging to the target language community, they would invest more in learning the language and become more proficient in that language.

This issue is also prominent in the context of immigrants and minorities learning the majority language as well as integrating into the mainstream culture; if their diversities are recognized and accepted by the majority group then they can develop positive self-identity and have positive imagination as part of the mainstream community, which would ultimately lead to better integration. However, studies (Bouchereau Bauer et al., 2015; Rivas, 2013; Yu et al., 2018) reveal that immigrant and minority groups have experienced unacceptance, discrimination as well as marginalization to different extents in different contexts, and these experiences have influenced on the identity construction and reconstruction. For instance, some second generation of immigrants in the United States show that they have encountered identity crisis since their appearance or heritage culture are different from the white people and not fully accepted by them; this leads them to reconnect with their own heritage language and culture in the adulthood and reformate their identities by accepting their own diversities and multicultural background (Shin, 2010). The same as some returnee students in the study of Rivas (2013) that they have experienced the exclusion from both cultures, neither were fully recognized as native American nor native Mexican, then when they met each other those with same experiences and constructed their own small culture and came to realize their in-between multicultural identities.

This means that apart from the language learning, other socio-cultural aspects have great influence on the identity formation, with one of these factors being the acceptance or

recognition of individual' diversities. The recognition and acceptance of one's own multicultural background might lead to positive self-identity and more acceptance to the mainstream culture and positive future imagination as part of the community, which again creates positive language learning experience and integration into the mainstream culture. In this sense, the identity is not fixed phenomenon but fluid, dynamic and negotiated through the time and space within which, the individual's understanding of own language, culture, and belief as well as attitudes towards otherness may change through the learning of a new language and related culture.

The analysis of the literature shows that the English language as one of the most powerful languages in the world nowadays goes beyond its functional employment as the international language for mutual communication, to its value as the cultural capital, which possesses symbolic as well as material values. Particularly, for minority people, the English language is the powerful language by which they negotiate their identities in the unequal power relationship among their own and mainstream languages, and this will be elaborated in the following section.

### **English Learning Experiences of Minority Students in non-native English Countries.**

Data from several studies (Gu & Patkin, 2013; Ma, 2009; Maluch, Newmann & Kempert, 2016; Nguyen & Bui, 2016) suggest that minority students in some non-native English speaking countries have some similar issues in the process of learning English. For instance, their linguistic and cultural diversities are often perceived by teachers as obstacles for academic achievement. Despite the fact of challenge, studies (Despaigne, 2015; Gu & Patkin, 2013; Groff et al., 2016) found that most minority students managed to invest in

English learning not only for material benefits but also for socio-cultural benefits such as reposition themselves from inferior or marginalized position and reconstruct their identities.

Some studies reveal that minority students' low proficiency in the majority language, which is always found to be the medium of classroom teaching, has caused some challenges for these students to comprehend the class content thus negatively impact their academic performances (Gu & Patkin, 2013; Ma, 2009; Nguyen & Bui, 2016). Gu and Patkin (2013) point out that most Asian minority students in Hong Kong could not continue to higher education because of their limited knowledge of Chinese language. In the same vein, this issue is also noted in the study of Nguyen and Bui (2016) that Vietnamese teachers reflected that minority students had difficulties to understand their class teaching in national Vietnamese language that the priority should be given to improving their knowledge of the national language rather than the English language. The similar issues have also been found in the Chinese context, and Ma (2009) argues that the English language should be taught in minority students' mother tongue in minority schools in China. These studies clearly pointed out that learning English through the majority language caused some challenges for minority students in terms of comprehending the learning contents.

Another challenge was found to be that minority students' linguistic and cultural diversities are perceived to be the hindrance for their academic success and thus not valued and included in the English learning classes by teachers. In spite of the benefits of multilingualism are highlighted in research (Cenoz, 2013), in most contexts, minority students' home languages are not supported in schools or even discriminated against. For instance, some teachers hold the view that minority students were "not intelligent and unable to learn well" (Nguyen & Bui, 2016, p. 99). Teachers' perception and interpretation of diversified

backgrounds of minority students also impact their teaching approach adopted through the English language class. Both studies of Despaigne (2015) and Nguyen and Bui (2016) demonstrate that English teachers did not recognize minority students' multilingual competences and multicultural background as valued resources, they favor adopting the monolingual teaching approach rather than incorporating minority students' language and culture into classroom teaching.

These teachers' perception of the minority students and their plurilingual competences mirrors the general stereotype of the minority people in many social contexts (Despaigne, 2015; Gu & Patkin, 2013; Groff et al., 2016). For instance, Mexican indigenous and minority students in Mexico feel themselves marginalized and discriminated against by others, being treated as an "Indio", which is "insulting and offensive", and are recognized as "inferior and less intelligent" (Despaigne, 2015, p. 374); similar to the South Asian ethnic minorities in Hong Kong that are "unrecognized or even ignored" and labeled as "undereducated and narrow-minded", "associated with negative attributes" (Gu & Patkin, 2013, p. 138). Although the linguistic minority students in the Quebec City of Canada do not express the above negative stereotypes associated with them, they still believe that local francophone people are not "open-minded" and there is "less acceptance" for the immigrants and minorities (Groff et al., 2016, p. 92).

Therefore, on the other hand, the English learning is generally perceived by these minority students as acquiring the cultural capital which could not only expand their future opportunities but also empower them to reposition themselves from the marginalized status and reconstruct multiple identities by creating the imagined community as global or elite identities. As described by Despaigne (2015) that minority students in Mexico developed autonomous learning agency to invest in English learning in order to resist the inferior position

and reconstruct the identity associated with 'modern people' and 'elite'. In the same vein, Groff et al., (2016) state that minority students in Quebec favored to attend the English medium universities and felt proud to be more proficient in English than local francophone students, this enabled them to resist the marginalized position imposed on them by the local dominant group.

However, the inspiration and admiration for English might lead to the counter-discourse created by the minority group against the local language and culture. For instance, South Asian ethnic minority students in the study of Gu and Patkin (2013) noted that "they turned to Western culture for inspiration, again ignoring local culture and language" (p. 139). Thus, this might further marginalize minority students to integrate into the mainstream culture and exacerbate the social stratification even generate some risks for maintaining the social cohesion in the society.

Considering all of these experiences, it seems that in many non-native English speaking countries, minority students have same issues in learning the English language in terms of difficulties in class comprehension and discrimination against of their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. However, most minority students perceived the English language as the cultural capital, the language with a power which may enable them to balance their unequal status and deprived rights in the society. For instance, they consider that by learning English and be proficient with the language, they can have better opportunities for study and job in the future, negotiate the multiple identities to resist the discrimination and marginalization, and reposition themselves to the imagined communities in which they possess better status, money, and success, as the empowered minorities.

### **The Context of the Study**

Before proceeding to the methodology chapter, it is necessary to provide the context of the present study in terms of English education in China, English for minorities in Xinjiang and minority students' English learning experiences at Chinese universities.

**English language in education in China.** The English language has enjoyed an unprecedented rise in importance and status in China during recent decades mainly after the Open Door Economic Policy initiated by Chinese vice Premier Deng Xiaoping in 1978. In the same year, English has been the essential part of the high stake examinations such as College Entrance Examination (gaokao). The weight of score of English language in the gaokao has increased from 100 points in the early years to 150 points out of total 750 points nowadays; in some provinces and cities that have the authorization to set their own College Entrance Examination tests, English language test score even weights higher such as “120 points out of total 480 points in Shanghai”(Adamson & Xia, 2011, p. 4).

After the successful bid for holding 2008 Olympic Games and successful admission to join the World Trade Organization at the beginning of the 21st century, the importance of learning English has been even more emphasized. In 2001, the Ministry of Education has issued three policy documents to promote the English language education. The first document established that all school should start English language class from primary year three (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2001a). The second document specified the required levels of proficiency in English for secondary school leavers (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2011). The third document set the goal that five to ten percent of the undergraduate curriculum will be instructed through the English language within three years (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2001b). English language competency has been one of the most important measurements of



academic success for students and prerequisite for high paying jobs and promotion for graduates (Feng, 2012; Feng & Sunuodula, 2009; Gu & Guo, 2016; Sunuodula & Cao, 2015; Pan, 2015).

As Pan & Pan (n.d.) illustrates that English ideology has dominated the nation and this is the language which possesses the economic, social and cultural capital. For Chinese people, learning English is not only a matter of mastering a foreign language in order to join international communication but more importantly, “a step for socioeconomic advancement” (Zhan & Sun, as cited in Sunuodula & Cao, 2015, p. 67). The notion of ‘Chinese –English Bilingual education’ has been widespread mostly in most developed eastern regions and the image of future talents ‘FuhexingRencai’ is generally interpreted as “competent bilingual person specialized in science and technology area” (Feng, 2009, p. 290). Thus, the English language ideology prevails among the whole nation as the language promising the individual to possess economic, social and symbolic capital for being a member of ‘imagined community’ as ‘elite community’, which deserved and demanded the ‘investment’ for the young generation.

**English for ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.** Despite the fact that English language education has been given the priority for the majority of schools through the country, the policy document issued in 2002 stating with an implicit tone that “the relationship between the minority language and the Mandarin Chinese should be correctly managed...English should be offered in regions where favorable conditions exist” to imply that not all minority schools are mandatory to offer English education (State Council, 2002, as cited in Feng & Sunuodula, 2009, p. 687). Researchers argue that there are two underlying notions behind this implicit tone; the first is repositioning the Chinese language as the priority compared to minority

languages, then the English provision is an option for minority schools but not mandatory as for majority schools (Feng & Sunuodula, 2009; Guo & Gu, 2016; Sunuodula & Cao, 2015).

A line of studies has reported on the limited accessibility of English education for minority school students in Xinjiang (Feng & Sunuodula, 2009; Guo & Gu, 2016; Sunuodula & Cao, 2015; Tsung, 2014). Feng and Sunuodula (2009) state that “Xinjiang is probably one of the regions with the most limited provision of English in the country and is simply kept out of the system; the opportunity to learn English in minority schools is just not available” (p. 694). Some studies have conducted survey among minority students at tertiary level and find that these students have had no English language class at schools and some students have learned English at private training center but the number of these students is limited (Wu; Olan, as cited in Feng & Sunuodula, 2009). This is similar to the findings of Tsung (2014) that she has carried out case studies of two Uyghur minority schools in rural area in Xinjiang by field visit in 2006, 2009 and 2011. The researcher noticed that in one merge minority school where Han students are placed in Han classes while Uyghur students and other ethnic minority Kazakh are placed in minority class (known as minzu class), the provision of English language is just not available at minzu class due to the lack of teachers who can teach English to Uyghur students and limited resources such as textbooks in Uyghur language.

A comprehensive study of English provision at minority schools in Xinjiang was conducted by Sunuodula and Cao (2015) by employing both qualitative and quantitative methods from 2010 to 2011. They had two rounds semi-structured interviews with ten university Uyghur students, two teachers, and four policymakers, they also have conducted participant observations and questionnaire surveys at four research sites including two minority secondary schools in Xinjiang, an Inside-Xinjiang junior secondary school class in

which Chinese was the medium of instruction and an inland Xinjiang class. Their findings confirm that English language education is limited and the Chinese language is intensified at minority schools as the English language is not required subject in the College Entrance Examination whereby the Chinese language replace it with respect to the preferential policy.

Apart from the limited access to English provision for minority Uyghur students in schools, some studies (Feng & Sunuodula, 2009; Feng, 2012; Ma, 2009; Tsung, 2014) point out that learning English through second language (Chinese) has some negative impact on minority students with poor knowledge of Chinese. For instance, some students reported that in English tests they have to translate sentences from English to Chinese, and students who were not good at Chinese would lose points ().

Even though the limited access to English learning has been offered for minority Uyghur students in Xinjiang, they still possess the strong motivation and enthusiasm towards English learning. The same findings (Adamson & Feng, 2009; Feng & Sunuodula, 2009; Sunuodula & Cao, 2015) show that Uyghur students believe that English carries profound symbolic, cultural and material resources that they eager to learn this third language; “English is really new and it is like new blood in [the Uyghur youth in Xinjiang] body” (Sunuodula & Cao, 2015, p. 96). The provision of English language learning is believed to offer these minority students opportunities to empower themselves in order to get the equal footing with Han counterparts.

However, there is little research on the implementation of trilingual education in Kazakh people dominant regions in Xinjiang like Altay, Tarbagatay, Karamayi, Ili and Urumqi, where the regional economy has developed better due to abundant metal, oil resources, flourishing tourism industry and increasing international trade with boundary

country like Kazakhstan. As Adamson and Feng (2009) suggest that the accretive model of trilingual education can be or might have been implemented in Kazakh dominated regions in Xinjiang. Therefore, the present study aims to contribute to enriching understanding of ethnic minority education in western China in terms of English learning for Kazakh minority students.

### **Minority students' English language learning experiences in Chinese universities.**

At the beginning of 1990s, the transformation has taken place in China, which includes the decentralized educational system that universities have been granted a high degree of autonomy to meet the market economy (Adamson & Xia, 2011). With the spread of English language ideology as we mentioned in sections before, "a large number of higher education institutions pursue the policy of no CET-4 certificate, no bachelor degree" (Adamson & Xia, 2011, p. 5). CET (College English Test) is initiated by the Ministry of Education in 1980s; there are two types of CET: CET Band 4 for second-year students and CET Band 6 for third-year students. CET has been changed in format and content: from written form to computer-based; from more focus on grammar exercises and translation tasks to listening and speaking sections. Non-English major students are required to take CET-4 in the second year and the minimum score to pass is 355 out of total 710; if they fail at the first test, then they can retake the test up to five times. The CET-4 certificate is prerequisite for the bachelor's degree, otherwise, students are given a statement by the university instead of the degree, as Adamson and Xia (2011) report that 600 out of 36,000 undergraduate students in a university located in central China have not passed the CET-4 and have not got the bachelor's degree; "Among the 600 graduates, a large number were ethnic minority students from Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Ningxia" (p. 5).

Other studies (Adamson & Feng, 2009; Feng, 2012; Guo & Gu, 2016; Han, Costa & Cui, 2016) have also reveal that 'dilemma' encountered by many minority students at tertiary institutions is that they have not learned English prior to the high education or their limited proficiencies compared with Han counterparts. The CET-4 requirement has caused huge pressure for them and taken the most time to prepare for the exam, which has been utilized by Han students to be more competitive in their professional subjects.

These negative impacts have been described in details by Han et al. (2016) that ethnographic studies have been carried out in one university in Jiangsu to examine the university English language policy and its impact on minority Uyghur students who came from Xinjiang. The researchers find that Uyghur students can be categorized into three groups: min kao han (minority students attended Chinese mainstream schools), min kao min (minority students who received school education in bilingual or trilingual minority schools) and neigao ban students (who has been selected by examination to receive senior middle school education in schools located in inland China, economically well-developed regions). Min kao min students are positioned in the most 'predicament' situation since most of them have started learning English only in the preparatory course (yukeban) after school graduation. Although the support has been offered by that university as "the score inflation regulation" for all courses taken by minority students from Xinjiang, many minority students still have expressed anxiety and stress for English learning and integration into majority stream (p. 320).

Although both studies (Han et al., 2016; Guo & Gu, 2016) have studied minority Uyghur students' English learning experiences at Chinese universities, they have different findings and this may result from the different educational background of their participants. Han et al. (2016) illustrate that low proficiencies in the English language of Uyghur students

have caused loss of interest in learning English, which again resulted in poor academic performance and led to a loss of self-esteem. The same issues have also been noted by (Guo & Gu, 2016; Yu, 2018) that stereotype of these minority students is 'not advanced', 'backward' and 'lag behind learners', and some minority students even pretended to hide their ethnic identity in order to prevent from feeling inferior to the majority students. In addition, this has resulted in the marginalization of minority students and they keep in their own small culture which hindered their integration into mainstream society.

Contrasted to these negative impacts reported by Han et al. (2016), Guo and Gu (2016) observe that some minority Uyghur students (most are min kao han and neigaoban students) have shown greater motivation and enthusiasm towards English learning, that they feel confident in their linguistic and cognitive advantages in learning English; they view English learning as 'empowerment' to be a part of 'imagined elite community' or 'global citizens', and this will be discussed in-depth in the latter section. Nonetheless, these studies come to an agreement that special support like offering extra tutoring hours of English learning by or various teaching methods adjusting to their English language levels have not been offered by their university teachers. The different findings from these researchers also reflect the intergroup stratification which may lead to intergroup conflicts and decreasing in enrollment to minority schools which will inevitably lead to loss of ethnic identity, linguistic and cultural heritage.

In view of all that has been mentioned so far, one may suppose that the inequity issues exist in terms of English provision at mainstream and minority schools in China. In other words, the limited access to formal English education at minority schools places minority students at the unequal footing with other students at Chinese universities. This distinction is

further escalated when English proficiency is prerequisite for degree conferral as well as advanced studies in master and doctoral programs. However, much of the research up to now has based on document analysis, and thus there is a need to provide a detailed understanding of these minority students' English learning experiences at Chinese universities.

### **Chapter 3. Methodology**

In the previous section, the conceptual framework of the study and existing relevant studies have been discussed. In this chapter, a more detailed account of the methodology of the study will be presented. In the first section, the rationales for choosing interview-based qualitative research design will be explained. The following section illustrates the sampling strategy and describes the participants of the study. The third part explicates the reasons for adopting interview as the research instrument. The following two sections describe the data collecting process and analyzing stages. Finally, the ethical considerations will be discussed.

This qualitative study attempts to explore Kazakh minority students' English learning experiences at Chinese universities and its influence on their identity (re)construction; the three key research questions that guided the study are: "What are English language learning experiences of minority Kazakh students at Chinese universities?", "How do Kazakh minority students in China view the benefits or opportunities of English learning?" and "How do Kazakh minority students perceive the impact of English language learning on identity (re)construction?"

#### **Research Design**

The study adopts interview-based qualitative research design for several reasons as follows. Firstly, the nature and characteristics of the qualitative study, one of these is that understanding the experiences, perspectives, and thoughts of participants" (Ritchie & Lewis, 2014, p. 120). Then, many studies in the field have employed qualitative design to explore the relationship between language and identity. Last but not least, as a novice researcher, within the short period of time for conduction research, the interview offered me the best chance to



understand participants' lived experiences in depth, and more flexibility was given through the process of coding, analyzing and interpreting with this research design.

A line of studies has discussed the nature and characteristics of the qualitative research design (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Creswell, 2012; Ritchie & Lewis, 2014). These studies have a common sense of the essence of the qualitative study as “naturalistic, interpretative approach, concerned with exploring phenomena ‘from the interior’” (Flick, as cited in Ritchie & Lewis, 2014, p. 3). The qualitative research involves studying people's real-life experiences in order to obtain a detailed, deep and complex understanding of the central phenomena or concept and individual's perspectives as well as views are given the priority in this research process (Yin, 2011; Creswell, 2013). As Yin (2011) states that “qualitative research explicitly embraces the contextual conditions, that is, the social, institutional, cultural and environmental conditions- within which people's lives take place” (p. 9). These factors are particularly crucial to have a holistic understanding of the main phenomenon in my study as the influence of language on minority students' identity (re)construction.

Based on the nature of qualitative design, most studies in the field of language learning and identity construction have employed the qualitative research method. For instance, Guo & Gu (2016) interviewed minority Uyghur students in inland Chinese universities to explore how their identities reconstructed through their experiences in inland Chinese universities.

Despaigne (2015) used case study to understand the English language learning experiences of indigenous and minority students in Mexico and influence on their identity reconstruction. In the similar vein, Yu, Brown, & Stephens (2018) employed retrospective case study approach to discover interplay between the changes of self-identities of Chinese students and the

English learning through time span and spaces. Moreover, Gu & Patkin (2013) conducted interviews with Asian minority students in Hong Kong to understand their perspectives towards heritage language, Chinese language and English language learning and identity formation.

Last but not least, as suggested in the study of Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) that the interview-based qualitative study is an option for novice researchers to practice and enhance their research skills. Besides, within the short period for the current research, I think the interview-based qualitative research design is the most productive and practical choice for me to gain the deep and thorough understanding of how the minority students view their English learning experience and how their identities negotiate during the learning of English language. Thus far, the rationales for choosing qualitative study have been discussed, and sampling strategy, as well as criteria for selecting participants will be explained in the following section.

### **Sampling Strategy and the Sample of Study**

According to researchers (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2012; Denzin, Norman, Lincoln, 2011), selection of research sample in the qualitative study is purposeful since “the logic of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases, with the objective of yielding insight and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 148). Besides, this non-probability form of sampling differentiates from the random sampling used in the quantitative study, and the researcher purposefully selects the participants who represent the minority group and may not be heard otherwise (Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2012).

Based on the purpose of my study to explore the influence of English language learning on identity (re)construction of minority Kazakh students at Chinese universities, I

purposefully choose ethnically Kazakh students as my participants and employ maximal variation sampling strategy according to the criteria that follow: who were born and brought up in China, currently studying in Chinese universities, and have at least three years of university studying experiences in order to provide thorough tertiary level learning experiences. Another criteria was that, these students are generally divided into two groups that one is those have obtained school education in mainstream Chinese schools and they are identified as 'min kao han'; other group is those studied in bilingual schools (shuangyu) and they are identified as 'min kao min'. The latter group 'min kao min' has little or no formal English education in school as I have presented in the literature review while the former group has started English learning from primary school; these different English learning experiences are crucial and vital to provide different perspectives regarding the influence of English language.

The sampling strategy for recruiting the participants in this study was snowball sampling, and the main reason for choosing this sampling strategy was that the political sensitivity of context as issues related to ethnic minority people is super-sensitive in the territory of Xinjiang, China in recent years. This issue was also reflected in the dissertation of Jian (2017) that the unreality of obtaining the permission from the administration of the universities in Xinjiang to conduct a study about minority people's identity issues. As described by Creswell (2012) that "qualitative snowball sampling...typically proceeds after a study begins and occurs when the researcher asks participants to recommend other individuals to be sampled" (p. 209). Based on the participant selecting criteria mentioned above and my familiar contextual social network, I contacted with several potential participants and also asked my acquaintance to help me to find other possible participants based on those criteria.

Once the list of the potential participants was developed, I contacted them via the most popular social network application, WeChat, to invite and negotiate with them about the interview dates as well as places. The planned total number of the participants were ten with the equal numbers for each abovementioned group; but in practice, nine participants (five from the group of 'min kao han' and four are 'min kao min') have participated in the study. One participant agreed initially but withdrew from the study just before the start of the interview because she was so worried that the interview would be monitored by authorities through mobile devices and this would cause some problems for her.

In total, nine participants joined the study (please see the Table 1): five participants have previous attended mainstream Chinese schools (min kao han) and four have attended bilingual schools (min kao min); five participants are undergraduate students while other four are postgraduate students; three participants are from inland universities while other six are from universities in Xinjiang. The description of the data collection method as well as the procedure is provided in the next chapter.

Table 1

## Participants' background information

Codes for participants	Previous school type	Studying program	Major	University	Bachelor majored in English
P1	Min kaohan	master 3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Public Administration	Minzu University of China	English
P2	Min kaohan	bachelor, 4 <sup>th</sup> year	English language	Wuhan University of Technology	English
P3	Min kaohan	Bachelor, 3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Finance	Xinjiang University	non
P4	Min kaohan	Doctoral, 3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Classical literature	Xinjiang University	English
P5	Min kao min	Bachelor, 4 <sup>th</sup> year	International Relations	Shihezi University	non

P6	Min kao min	Doctoral, 3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Botanical Research	Xinjiang University	non
P7	Min kao min	Bachelor, 4 <sup>th</sup> year	Law	Minzu University of China	non
P8	Min kao min	Bachelor, 3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Computer Network and Management	Xinjiang University	non
P9	Min kaohan	Master, 2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Law	Beijing University	English

### **Research Method and Data Collection Procedure**

In the previous section, the sampling strategy has been discussed. In this section, the justification for choosing the one-on-one semi-structured interview as my key research instrument and data collection procedure will be depicted more in details.

Based on the qualitative research design, I chose interview as the primary method for data collection because the most distinctive feature of this method is to obtain individual's perspectives of his or her experiences in depth (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2012). Moreover, the interview "has the potential to elicit rich, thick descriptions...offers researchers an opportunity to clarify statements and probe for additional information" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 154).

As regards to the type of interview, I chose semi-structured interview style because the main purpose of my study is to obtain the individual' own perspectives about their lives and thus the flexibility, as well as freedom for my participants to share their stories and views in their own ways are considered to be the first and foremost principle. The semi-structured interview not only enables the researcher to understand the participants "on their own terms and how they make meaning of their own lives, experiences, and cognitive processes", but also not request the researcher to strictly follow the predetermined question list, but to probe or prompt to clarify some vague or complex issues, at the same time guide the interview

process in order to cover many issues in certain period of time (Yin, 2011, p. 143; Alshenqeeti, 2014; Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2013). In addition, one-on-one interview is one of the most common interview types although it is time-consuming and not suitable if participants feel shy or embarrassed to touch some sensitive issues in front of another person. However, this challenge does not exist in my study and as the member of the community, we have some common experiences and these helped to build trust between participants and me and almost all participants shared their experiences and perspectives openly.

Apart from the attributes of the interview presented above, it also has some pitfalls which may affect the reliability and validity of the data. Many studies (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2013) note that the data obtained from the interviews are subjective opinions and can change over the time based on the context, and cannot fully reveal the real picture of the social life; like Hermanowicz (as cited in Alshenqeeti, 2014) claims that “while interviewing is among the most central, revealing and enjoyable methods that one can use in research, it is deceptively difficult” (p. 43). Moreover, the interpretations of the data are considered also to be biased and “filtered through the eyes of interviewer” which again reduce the reliability of this research method (Creswell, 2013, p. 218). Other challenges of the interview are: time-consuming as it takes lots of time to transcribe and analyze; and ethical issues like anonymity which will be discussed in the following section.

Based on reviewing the previous studies, the interview protocol was developed (see Appendix A) in terms of guiding research questions: minority students' experiences at universities, their views about the benefits of English language and identity (re)construction. Prior to the formal interview, I have conducted the pilot interview to check the clarity and usefulness of the questions; as Creswell (2009) indicates that pilot session is helpful for the researcher to reexamine the appropriateness and practicality of their research instrument. After

the pilot session, I revised some of the questions and translated interview questions into Chinese and Kazakh.

Prior to applying for Ethical Approval, I have completed online CITI training course and got the certificate to conduct 'No More Than Minimal Risk' human subject research. After obtaining Ethical Approval from NUGSE Research Committee, I started to contact potential participants and acquaintances via emails. In total, nine interviews were conducted in the places convenient for participants, for instance, the coffee shop or quiet café near their universities or home. The interview language was mainly Chinese, and sometimes we code-switched to Kazakh, except for one participant who favored using Kazakh language and sometimes used Chinese. Each interview lasted for 40 to 60 minutes, and I recorded eight interviews with my mobile phone based on my participants' consents. Before recording the interviews, I bought my participants some coffee and snacks and talked about some personal background in order to make them feel relaxed and build some rapport with them. As suggested in the study of Cohen et al. (2007) that the trust among interviewer and interviewee is necessary to make both parts to "joint pursuit of a common mission rising above personal egos" (p. 350).

Almost all participants shared their English learning experiences openly, without hesitation, but when we touched some sensitive topics related to challenges or identity shifts, some participants showed reluctance to talk. Instead of forcing them to continue, I shared my own stories to break the ice and then they shared theirs, including some challenging and embarrassed moments, joyful or sad memories. One participant even called me after the interview to add some additional thoughts and feelings she had. One participant withdrew the interview just before the start of recording, this was not expected and caused me some

pressure, but I managed to handle my own emotions and showed my understanding to her concerns about the local political sensitivity.

### **Data Analysis Approach**

In the previous section, the research method and data collection procedure have been discussed; this chapter will devote to explaining how I analyzed and interpreted the data.

The first step, the organization of data, is a very important step. As Creswell (2012) states, “at an early stage in qualitative analysis, you organize data into file folders or computer files” (p. 262). I transcribed recordings manually from my mobile phone to my computer files by repeatedly listening to the interview recordings, and I kept all transcriptions under the separate file in my personal computer, duplicated all the data and copy them to my hard disk to ensure the safety. The reason I chose manual transcribing is that I can immerse myself more and get “hands-on feel” while I am transcribing them by my own (Creswell, 2012, p. 240). I have left margins on both sides in my transcriptions to write down codes and some thoughts, and I began to read and reread the data to “immerse yourself in the details, trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts” (Agar, as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 183).

While reading the interview transcriptions many times, I jot down some thoughts about the text on the right margin and divided the data into segments as chopping down the whole image into separate ones with the similar focus. Then, on the left margin, I labeled these segments with initial codes, which are sometimes direct quotes of participants like “multiple identities”, sometimes I generalized the meaning by my own words like “traditional teaching approach”. After having the initial coding list about fifty codes, I compared and contrasted these codes to see whether they overlap each other and grouped similar ones to reduce the



number of codes. I returned to the transcriptions again to check whether I have missed some important quotes or other new codes might generate. Creswell (2014) described it as “an interactive practice” meaning that a researcher can go back and forth through the data analysis process (p. 262).

Finally, the initial coding list was reduced to seven themes with subthemes, and I draw the coding framework with these themes and subthemes by pointing out the participants like (P1) to count for the frequency of the codes. During the coding process, I have applied both inductive and deductive methods (Linda Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008), because I want to analyze my data from both directions like bottom-up and top-down to gather the holistic image and some codes are unexpected, interesting and valuable although they have not been mentioned in the previous studies.

After the coding process, I started writing thick descriptions based on the final themes and sub-themes related to the purpose of the study. According to famous qualitative methodologist Norman Denzin (as cited in Critique & Debate, 1973) that “the importance of the thick description is that it makes thick interpretation possible” (p. 3). Based on thick descriptions covering the major themes, the statements of the finding were formulated and would be presented in the finding chapter. The following section sheds light on the ethical issues of the study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As this study involves human subject and reports their individual life experiences as well as personal perspectives, the ethical considerations are strictly followed in the whole process of the research. At the beginning of the study, I submitted CITI training certificate, proposal and ethics application form which contains concerns like anonymity, confidentiality,

benefits as well as risks of the study, and the consent forms with translations in Kazakh and Chinese (see Appendix B); then I received the approval letter from NUGSE Research Ethics Committee on the 14<sup>th</sup> of November, 2017.

After recruiting the participants for the study, I sent them the consent forms in Chinese or Kazakh based on their conveniences and explained them the nature of the study without the deception. All participants signed the consent forms before interviews and interviews had been recorded based on their permissions only. Creswell (2013) states that interview leads to the unbalanced power asymmetry between the interviewer and interviewee as the interviewer “ruled” the whole process that more collaborations are suggested to involve participants in the data analysis and interpretation processes (p. 173). Thus, during the interview process, I asked the participants whether I have accurately understood, and I sent narrative descriptions to them to check the accuracy of the data.

Anonymity and confidentiality are of huge importance in the research process. Regarding the anonymity issue, I have not specified the name of participant either during the interviews or in data analysis, interpretation and presenting procedures, rather I used numeric codes to indicate certain participants like “P1” or “P2”. Their consent forms which have actual names are kept in a secure place that I am the only person who has the access. Moreover, the places chosen for conducting interviews were outside university territory in order to ensure the participants' anonymity.

In order to ensure the confidentiality of the data, I saved all the data in my personal computer which requires my fingerprint to gain access and kept precautions during the research process to prevent its disclosure. In addition, the data will be destroyed after I have

completed the master program in this year. Generally, I have barely encountered any challenges related to ethical considerations.

### **Reliability and Validity**

One issue should be taken into account of conducting qualitative research is that the analysis and interpretation of the interview transcripts could be very subjective and limited to researcher's personal perspectives (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Thus, the reliability and validity issues are necessary to highlight during the research process. Therefore, I engaged several groupmates to read the interview transcriptions and discussed their interpretations, thus to raise awareness of personal prejudice, and enhance the reliability and validity of data interpretation.

To conclude, this chapter has provided the description of the methodology applied in the present study. The research adopted qualitative interview-based approach by employing semi-structured interview for data collection. Nine ethnic minority Kazakh students at Chinese universities participated in the study. The data was analyzed and interpreted by using both inductive and deductive approaches. All necessary measures were ensured to enhance the participants' anonymity and confidentiality. In the next chapter, the principal findings of the current research will be presented.

### **Chapter 4. Findings**

The previous chapter described the methodology employed in the study, and this chapter will present the findings based on the main research questions. The main purpose of the study is to explore the impact of English language learning on minority Kazakh students' identity (re)construction in Chinese universities. Three major research questions guided the study: 1) minority Kazakh students' English learning experiences at Chinese universities; 2) their views about benefits or opportunities of the English language learning; 3) the influenced of English on their identity (re)construction.

Data for this study was collected using interview-based qualitative research design, and findings are presented based on three research questions. Six major themes have been identified as follows: positive learning experiences, and negative learning experiences, benefits of English learning, opportunities offered by English learning, developing multiple identities and reconstructing self-perceptions.

#### **English Learning Experiences of Minority Kazakh Students at Chinese Universities**

Generally, the data obtained from respondents regarding their English learning experiences at Chinese universities is presented under two subthemes: positive learning experiences reflected in improvement of English knowledge and learning English cultures, development of autonomous learning skills, employing pluralistic learning approach and participation in campus activities; and negative learning experiences related to insufficient language exposure in class, psychological stress and the low proficiency of Chinese language to understand the class content.

**Positive learning experiences.** A variety of perspectives were expressed related to positive experiences: English-majored and non-majoring students have different in class

English learning experiences; most participants have developed autonomous learning skills by employing online and offline resources, and attending private courses; participation in student competition in English language.

The findings revealed certain differences in learning experiences between non-majoring and English-majoring participants. Non-majoring students learn English through grammar-translation teaching approach focusing mainly on grammar and vocabulary and improving mostly these aspects of language acquisition. Interestingly, that they perceive this approach positively considering the improvement of grammar and vocabulary as crucial for helping them to pass the CET (College English Test) on one hand, and for them to develop reading as well as writing skills on the other hand. For example, one interviewee said:

*“English classes at university is not different from English at school, they [teachers] mainly focus on grammar and vocabulary...these are definitely important skills, not only for passing CET but also for improving reading and writing abilities.” (Participant, 2).*

As for English majoring students, the findings indicate more varied learning practices reflected in audio and video listening practices, various tasks specifically focused on the development of reading, writing, listening and speaking language skills. As one participant described that “we have various English classes, and teachers’ teaching styles are in accordance with teaching content and target” (Participant 1).

Besides, some participants of both groups also reported about their experiences with learning and getting acquainted with other cultures through the English language that some teachers incorporated into their teaching through telling western myths, tales, and organizing

comparisons between western and eastern cultures, traditions and beliefs in their classes. The reporting students found such exposure to different cultures t interesting and motivating them to learn the language and its related culture, as illustrated in the quote below:

*“I like the teacher who taught English reading very much, he explained some expressions with its origins from Greek myth...um...like Achilles’’ heel, after that, I started reading Greek myths to understand the language more deeply.” (Participant 9).*

A common view amongst interviewees was that they have invested in English learning by devoting their time, energy and money to employ various online and offline resources and take private courses outside classroom learning. By doing so they have developed autonomous learning skills. It is important to note that some participants reported that their English proficiencies were much lower than other students and that in-class learning opportunities were not sufficient for them to improve the language skills. This causes them to look for various autonomous learning strategies and invest in English learning by employing multiple resources. Such strategies helped them to overcome these problems and developed independent learning ability which was considered to be positive as well as useful for future. As one interviewee put it:

*“...it was hard at the beginning.... I made lots of effort to learn [English] ...now I realize that I have developed the habit of hard-working and independent learning ability, I think these are important for future career and life.” (Participant 2).*

Based on the responses of the interviewees, they have developed autonomous learning skill by employing multiple resources online and offline: some students listened to online

BBC or CNN channels to practice listening and note-taking skills; some students watched their favorite American or British TV series to learn oral English; some students bought CET preparing materials and did many grammar, vocabulary and sentence translation exercises; some students installed various Chinese mobile applications designed for improving vocabularies or practicing oral English via online classes, such as “Shan Bei Vocabulary” or “Coco English” and developed convenient and efficient learning approaches. Participant stated that,

*“I spend about half an hour a day on practicing English vocabulary on my phone, I made some progress, cause I can catch most talks on The Big Bang Theory [American television series] and less rely on translation scripts” (Participant, 3).*

And another participant said that *“I went to the library almost every day after class, and I listened to BBC/CNN channels online to practice listening and note-taking skills, it was helpful. I also did a lot of exercises on grammar and translation, I worked so hard to improve English proficiency” (Participant, 1).*

It is interesting to note that participants who are currently studying in postgraduate programs all had prepared for and took additional English exams like TOEFL or IELTS. When asked about the reasons for taking additional tests, the participants were unanimous in the view that they wished to pursue a master or doctoral degree at universities abroad. For example, one doctoral participant said, *“I prepared for TOEFL since I had thoughts about applying for foreign universities master programs, although I failed at this, my English skills improved greatly.” (Participant 6).*

Another way of investing in English learning was found to be attending the private

courses. Some students found that they had many language exposures during private courses and there were few students in one class and teacher could adjust learning progress based on their levels. As one interviewee put it, "I took the private course taught by a teacher from Iran, her English was perfect, and she knew my weakness and encouraged me to speak more during class, actually I enjoyed her class." (Participant 5).

It is interesting to note that some minority students have attended English language center 'Darin' in Urumqi, where they had English classes taught by Kazakh teacher. They felt this was easier than learning through merely Chinese since Kazakh teachers explained them grammar rules in the native language and made some interesting connotations of English words or phrases with meanings in Kazakh language or Chinese language. For instance, the teacher related 'essential' to 'essenshal' as the word 'shal' means the man of wisdom in Kazakh, the 'essential' was described by the teacher as the core and the most important part of the thing (Participant 7). By doing so, these students employed their pluralistic background in the English language learning as one interviewee said, "I learned [English] fast through Kazakh language and I think that, compared with Chinese, the Kazakh language is closer to English, and comparison among these three languages made English learning more fun" (Participant 6).

When asked about their experiences of participation in social events related to English language on campus, only one participant told me that he joined the debate competition to discuss topics of international affairs in English. The participant described his experience,

*"This was my first time to use English to discuss professional topics, I felt like a diplomat, during the preparation process, and I found many insightful articles and realized that I should improve English to be advanced in my own field." (Participant*



5).

Taken together, participants reflected that they had some positive English learning experiences in terms of developing autonomous learning strategies, getting familiar with western cultures and applying pluralistic learning strategies.

**Negative learning experiences.** Three subthemes generated from Kazakh minority students' negative learning experiences at universities: 1) insufficient English language exposure in classes, 2) psychological stresses in terms of feelings of discrimination and inferiority because of significant disparities of English background knowledge from majority students, 3) and problems of learning English through the second language as Chinese.

Nearly all participants noted that English classes were “**teacher-centered**”, and they had limited exposure to the language during the classes “We sit, listen and leave the room” (Participant, 6), “sometimes we have group discussions but not often” (Participant, 2), “I would say the classes are not interesting, I always just sat and thought irrelevant things” (Participant, 8), “classes are teacher-centered, we have little time for practice, maybe students are too many.” (Participant 3). This is also one reason that some students chose to take private English classes with small size students.

Apart from this, just above half of the participants described teaching approach was too “**scholastic**”: they think that teachers pay too much attention to grammar and vocabulary, rather than functional usage like communication; “dumb English” was the way one student described it. Another student said, “We learn the language itself, but not for using the language to talk with people, not everyone wants to be English linguistic expert.” (Participant 5).

Most participants indicated that during English language classes at universities they all experienced psychological stress, to different extents, pointing out to different reasons for stress: The first reason they named was much lower level of English language proficiency of minority students as compared with the inland Chinese ethnic students, just over half of those respondents (who are studying in inland universities) reported that their English background knowledge were much poorer than Han (Han ethnic) students, particularly, those Han students from inland developed provinces such as Jiangsu, Hubei, Shanghai and Beijing. They explained that the English classes were designed based on majority level and they felt especially difficult to catch up during the initial first and second years. For example, one interviewee said,

*“...Han (ethnic Chinese) students especially those from southern part have really great [English language] background in terms of grammar and vocabulary. You know, um, they even got so much higher scores on entrance examination, thus, I needed to study very, very hard to catch up.” (Participant, 1)*

This above view was echoed by other participant like:

*“...at the beginning, it was so hard for me, our gap is so big, I was so surprised to see that their [Han students from inland cities] vocabulary base is so great, the same was their grammar knowledge, I could not even understand what they were talking.” (Participant, 2)*

They also reflected that they had made huge effort in order to catch up with other students, and the representative comments as following:

*“I took notes to 5 or 6 pages each English class, you know, for them [majority Han*

*students] one page is ok.” (Participant, 9)*

*“I devoted all my time in library, reading, doing grammar exercise, learning vocabularies, just because I did not want to lag behind, and felt inferior to them [majority Han students].” (Participant, 6)*

The second cause for the psychological stress derives from the CET (College English Test), some students worried that if they could not pass the test, they would not get the degree. According to participants, the CET-4 (College English Test band score 4) or TEM-6 (Test for English Majors band score 6) is a must for obtaining the bachelor degree; ‘No CET, and No Degree’ is a common rule at universities. Concerns were expressed like “I failed at CET three times and I am so worried that whether I could pass it”, “I failed at CET at the first trial, I was so stressed and prepared for it intensively, then I passed”, “I studied so hard, did lots of exercises to prepare for TEM, I was worried somehow but I passed the test at the first time”, and one participant of master program said, “some of my groupmates, minority students from Tibet, did not get the bachelor degree but the diploma instead.”(Participant 1). It is important to note that one participant, who studies at one university in Beijing, was informed during the last year of bachelor that min kao min students (bilingual school background) could take HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test) to replace the CET to get the degree. She pointed out, “I was too stressed that I could not get the degree because of CET, now I am released.” (Participant 7)

There was a sense of feeling discrimination and inferiority amongst participants as some of them indicated that their knowledge as well as ethnic background was overlooked by teachers and their disparities of background knowledge sometimes were misperceived as ‘minority students were not intelligent or capable learner’ by teachers and peers. As participants indicated that, “they [teachers] have little knowledge about minority people, and

they do not care much about this issue” (Participant 1); “they [teachers] do not know that we [minority] have not studied English at school...they designed the lessons based on the level of those students [Han majority] and I could not follow, um, it was too difficult for me.” (Participant 7). Almost two-thirds of the respondents said that they had experienced some stresses because of these feelings of discrimination and inferiority, as one participant stated that, “sometimes it feels like I am not good as them at English because I am a minority, actually, they [students from inland developed cities] have better quality of school education than us.” (Participant 8). Similarly, another participant mentioned that she studied very hard to catch up with those majority students in order to gain respect from teacher and peers (Participant 2).

Another reported negative learning experiences was that a minority of participants reflected that they had some difficulties of in-class English learning through their second language, Chinese. It is important to note that among four min kao min (attended bilingual school) participants, half of these students who were from Urumqi did not consider Chinese as the medium of instruction in English class was difficult, while other participants had problems of comprehending the content in English class and took private courses offered in Kazakh language as mentioned above. As one participant put it,

*“They [English teachers] are ethnic Chinese, and they use Chinese to explain grammars, my Chinese is not good enough, besides, I did not learn English at school, and therefore, I could not understand and gave up learning it [English].”* (Participant, 7).

In sum, with respect to students' English learning experiences at universities, two major themes were identified as positive learning experiences and negative learning experiences. In terms of positive experiences, respondents reported that they had improved

vocabulary and grammar knowledge through learning in classes, and they also had developed various autonomous learning strategies. Regarding to negative experiences, they reflected that they had experiences stresses due to some reasons like disparities of background knowledge compared with majority students, they also reported that they had little language exposure and practices during classes, and a few students noted the problem of learning English through second Chinese language.

### **Students' Views about the Benefits and Opportunities of English Language Learning**

The second research question aimed at revealing participants' views about the benefits and opportunities of English language learning, and there are 3 subthemes related to the benefits and 2 subthemes for the opportunities.

**Benefits of English learning.** Regarding the benefits of English learning, three subthemes emerged from interview answers: wide-range of resources as well as widened social network; advanced studies and scholarship for study abroad; opened door to learning other languages. In general sense, the term of benefits is referred to the advantages have already been obtained by minority students while the term of opportunity to benefits might be obtained in future.

A recurrent subtheme in the interview was a sense amongst interviewees that they were able to access into wide-range resources by learning the English language. The participants, on the whole, demonstrated that they learned about the outside world more through online resources in English. As one participant described that “when I learned English, I feel like that I connect to the world; that I learned many things online...there are abundant resources in English” (Participant 4). For a small number of participants, the English language was the reason to get updated information about science and technology, and they could read the

original source if they master the language. As one interviewee put it, "It is better sometimes, to read in English original writing, like some books in programming, Chinese translation made things more complicated and confused" (Participant, 8). In the same vein, English is helpful for reading subject materials: two Ph.D. students emphasized that they had to read journals, works of literature and studies written in English since the majority of research studies worldwide were published in English language. Likewise, two participants indicate that they read subject books in English in order to be more professional in their own subject area.

Apart from widened access to resources, above half of the participants reported that their social network had been expanded because of English. As one interviewee said, "I can talk with foreign teachers and students on campus, I do like communicating with them." (Participant 9). Likewise, another interviewee noted that "I met international students and we talked a lot, then we became friends, and I have learned lots of things from them." In addition, they believe that communicating with foreign people is another motivation for them to learn English.

The second subtheme of the benefits of English learning relates to degree conferral and advanced studies. 55% of those who were interviewed indicated that they got CET or TEM certificate which was the prerequisite for obtaining the degree. "I studied hard to pass the TEM which I think is important for degree and further study" (Participant 1); "my English is good, and I passed the CET without many difficulties, but some of my groupmates are still struggling to pass the test." (Participant 2). A small number of participants concurred that they studied very hard to improve their English during the initial years of bachelor degree because they decided to pursue further study to Ph.D. and English was the prerequisite for this. In one case, one participant stated that:

*“I did not go back to home and relax during summer or winter break of bachelor study, rather I attended English private course because I wanted to pursue master and doctoral degree” (Participant, 6).*

Additionally, one participant won a one-year scholarship to study in Australia by master students' exchange program, and she noted that she got IELTS band score 7.5 to compete for this opportunity. For her, English offered the chance to go abroad and study the master program.

The last benefit that was reported by a small number of participants that learning English opened the door for learning other languages. One participant described that she learned English and became interested in languages learning, then she learned Persian, Turkish, German and Russian languages, “I like learning English, then I learned Turkish and German myself...and I learned Persian because that I am studying classical literature and some of them are only in the Persian language...Russian is my second language during bachelor study” (Participant 4). Participant 5's experience is different that he has made some foreign friends who came from Russia, and then he learned Russian from then and became very proficient in that language.

**Opportunities offered by English learning.** Two sub-themes emerged under this theme: prospective career and increased geographical mobility in future. The first subtheme surfaced in relation to that English learning would lead to more future career opportunities. The majority of participants were unanimous in the view that the English language was a prerequisite for a prospective career opportunity, most representative comments are: “I am practicing English and after graduation I would then have more [employment] choices”, “English is a must for finding a good job”, “you should know English well if you want to

work in big and international corporations". However, some students considered that not all kinds of the job require high proficiency level of English, and it seems to be a "decoration" or "plus" on the resume but with little actual or functional usages. "If you have CET, IELTS or TOEFL certificate on your resume, then it looks more attractive and you might have more possibilities to get the job, but then you might not use it [English] at all" (participant 5).

The second finding is connected with the increased geographical mobility. Two students pointed out that they went abroad and used English to communicate with local people while other two students commented that they practiced English much since they wanted to travel around the world in future. "I want to see the world, and English is one of the instruments to help to achieve my goal" was the way one participant phrased it.

Taken together, based on participants' opinions, English offered them benefits such as advanced study and study abroad; wide-range of resources and materials; learning other languages. Meanwhile, participants believed that there are some opportunities for prospective future career and increased geographical mobility offered by the English language.

### **The Impact of English on Identity (re) Construction**

In line with the third research question about the impact of English language learning (ELL) on their identity (re)construction, it was found out that ELL influenced these students' identity in two ways: 1) it increased multicultural awareness and developed multicultural and global identities; 2) it empowered minority students to resist inferior or marginalized position and construct imagined elite identity.

#### **Increase multicultural awareness to develop multicultural and global identities.**

The majority of respondents indicated that they became more open to different cultures, and became aware of differences among these cultures and norms by learning the English



language that they were able to access to various resources in the English language, and communicate with people of various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. For example, one participant said,

*“English as my third language, changed my way of thinking, I am seeing bigger picture now, at least from three angles, maybe, I have multicultural awareness, I don't know, I don't go extreme with either one culture, and I just integrate these different cultures to adapt to better way of living”*(Participant 2).

Similarly, some participants stated that learning English influenced their understanding of different culture and religion through offering them possibilities to access to various information and resources, Thanks to it they became more tolerant and accepted to otherness and embrace the cultural diversities. The following quotations best illustrate these ideas:

*“I am not restricted to a certain culture, rather the integration of various cultures, I mean, a kind of multicultural identity has been constructed, that I can cross different cultures and feel no longer betrayal or shame for not staying in the boundary of one cultural identity”* (Participant,5).

*“I have friends of various ethnic and national backgrounds at campus, and I think some stereotypes I had before are wrong, those ethnic, religious labels sometimes misguide you from knowing the real world, thus we need to break these limitations sometimes, allowing more freedom for ourselves, and exploring the world with less predetermined doctrines, rather by our own eyes, thoughts and reflections.”*  
(Participant, 9)

It was found that the increase of multicultural awareness in its turn impacted on their

perceptions of themselves as multicultural persons, thus bringing on the surface of the concept of “multicultural identity”. In one case, the participant reflected that she had experienced confusion of cultural identity that she struggled to be identified either as a Kazakh or a Chinese, and felt herself not fully accepted by each group; after she learned various people and cultures in the world by watching or reading various resources in English like TED talks, she realized that she could choose to embrace rather than struggle to have more than one cultural identity and she identified herself as multicultural person as following:

*“...I was so confused that whether I am a Kazakh or Chinese, you know, my Kazakh is not good, and I felt that I could not totally been accepted by other Kazakh people, as someone in-between, I struggled very much since teenage age...now I felt no longer shame about this issue, I perceive myself as a multicultural person.”*

*(Participant, 9)*

In other words, the construction of multicultural identity at the same time help these minority Kazakh student to create a ‘third space’ which surpasses ethnic, national and religious identities and go beyond these “labels” to a wider global or cosmopolitan identity. The majority of students were unanimous in this view and most prominent comments are:

*“I learned the world through it [English], and I realize that we should not restrict ourselves to certain ethnic, racial or national identities, rather we can just be anyone we want.” (Participant, 5)*

*“...before I would say myself as a Urumqi local Kazakh, very limited to my ethnic and local identity, but now I start seeing myself from bigger picture that I am a human, just same as other human on earth.” (Participant 4)*

*“I watched many western films and read their books, I have realized that we have not much differences, and we should not limit ourselves in our ethnic and religious identities, but we can go beyond these limitations.” (Participants, 3)*

The “global identity” was explained by participants as that they felt belongings to the world community and had obligations to contribute to this big community. In one case, the participant stated that, “I would say myself as a global citizen, and I feel like I am connecting with the rest of world and I am keen on what are happening through this world.” Likewise, another participant commented that she had learned about the world through English language and she identified herself as a global citizen now (Participant 1).

However, they also pointed out that they did not abandon their own ethnic, national or religious identities but cross their boundaries and leave space to reflect on previous beliefs and values and established more objective and independent thinking patterns. “I am still a Kazakh, I admit, but at the same time, I am not only a Kazakh, what I mean that, firstly, I am a human”, “I don’t mean that I denied my ethnic identity as a Kazakh, but I have freedom to across this ethnic identity and come back to it if I want” was some common explanations.

**Resist inferior or marginalized position and construct imagined elite identity.** A common view amongst interviewees was that they invested in English learning to acquire cultural capital and build confidence to resist minority position and attain elite identity in future. Over half of those who were interviewed revealed that they had experienced feelings of inferiority because of their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds were ignored by teachers or peers and some of them experienced discrimination because of stereotypes or labels existed in the society to perceive minority group as backward or not intelligent people. As they considered themselves were good at foreign language learning compared with ethnic Chinese

students, the knowledge of English language seems to empower themselves to enhance self-esteem and confidence. Most representative comments are:

*“I think that my ethnic and cultural background is not accepted or recognized by this society, it means that we are the second class people...that by learning English, I can improve my low self-esteem as I improve my social status...that means I learn English because I want to be recognized by the majority group because we know that English is the most powerful language in the world...” (Participant, 8).*

Similarly, another participant reported that she learned hard to regain the lost self-esteem, “at the beginning, I felt humiliated and low self-esteem since my [English] background knowledge was much poorer than other students...I studied very, very, very hard to learn and improve my English, then gradually I have rebuilt my self-esteem and gain respect from them[teachers and peers].” (Participant, 2).

They found that bilingual or trilingual people were good at language learning than monolinguals, and this helped them to feel confident, as one participant put it,

*“We [minority students] have better oral pronunciations than them [ethnic Chinese students], and I think this is because we have grown up in a bilingual environment and we [bilinguals] are good at learning foreign languages.”(Participant, 8).*

This view was echoed by other participants, as:

*“...although my [English] background knowledge is poorer at the beginning, I catch up with them and for us, English is not so difficult, maybe minority people are good at language learning.” (Participant 2).*

Some participants also mentioned that they studied hard to be proficient in the English language, which would promise them to attain the imagined 'elite identity' in future. Nearly half of participant (two master students and two Ph.D. students) thought that they had become or would become part of the elite community since they had advanced studies and high proficiency of English language, which promised brightening and prospective career opportunities. Participant 4 said, "I am a researcher, I would say, and I feel proud to be a researcher, I imagine myself as a professor in future, elite person, yes, I think so." It is interesting to note that the imagination of becoming a part of an elite community in future motivates them to invest more in improving their professional and English knowledge. This is illustrated in the comment below:

*"...after graduation, I want to join the international firm like McKinsey, and to be professional in the business sphere, become elite personnel in future, that is why I put all my effort to be master in English, it [high proficiency of English language] is required absolutely." (Participant, 9)*

However, one participant pointed out that she had lost confidence because she failed at English learning due to several reasons: she had formal English language course only during the university preparation course designed for minority students and her English background knowledge was much lower than peers; she could not understand the content during English classes because of her insufficient Chinese proficiency. She explained that she gave up applying for further master degree study because she failed at CET and believed that she would never pass the test. Her comment is presented as follows:

*"...if I pass the test, I would apply for master, but I don't think that I can pass it, it is too difficult for me...as we [min kao min] have no English background knowledge have*

*too many difficulties to follow English class contents, I just come to the class, and then leave, I barely learn anything.” (Participant, 7)*

To sum up, by investing in English language learning, minority Kazakh students attempted to ‘resist the inferior or marginalized position’ and empower themselves to strengthen the confidence as well as ability to be able to move upward after graduation. More importantly, English language enabled these students to access into wider resources online and learned to be open to various cultures, which again help them to reflect on their own cultural values and construct multiple identities like a ‘multicultural man’ or global citizen.

**List of Main Findings:**

1. Most participants have positive English learning experiences in terms of improved English knowledge although English majoring and non-majoring students have different classroom learning experiences; and the majority has developed autonomous learning skills by employing multiple online and offline resources, and investing in private tutoring courses.
2. Many Kazakh minority students also have reported some negative English learning experiences related to insufficient language acquisition in class, poorer English knowledge background compared with Han counterparts, psychological stress stemmed from feelings of inferiority and discrimination, and challenges to learning English through Chinese language.
3. For most Kazakh minority students, the benefits of English learning are not limited to instrumental use like future employment or advanced studies, but also widened their knowledge and worldview, social network and opened door for learning other

languages. However, a few students noticed that English offered the 'imagined empowerment' on the resume with less practical function in the local society.

4. Under the influence of English learning, majority of the respondents have increased multicultural awareness, and some students have reconstructed 'multiple identities' as multicultural and global identities, which created 'a third space' to go beyond their ethnic and national identities and confused identities as 'someone in-between'.
5. Most minority students were empowered by English language in terms of enhanced confidence and increased cultural capital which in its turn enabled them to 'resist inferior or marginalized position' and reconstruct imagined elite identity. However, there are evidences that English language disempowered minority Kazakh students with little previous English education prior to university.

To conclude, findings in this chapter indicates that minority Kazakh student had positive and negative English learning experiences at universities such as they had built autonomous learning strategies, undergone psychological stresses and so on. Meanwhile, they understood the benefits and opportunities offered by English learning thus invested in the language to acquire the cultural capital; by doing so, they have promoted multicultural awareness, develop multicultural and global identities on one hand, and empowered themselves to build confidence and resist against the marginalized position as minority group on the other hand. The next chapter, therefore, moves on to discuss the interpretations of those findings.

## Chapter 5. Discussions

The aim of this study is to explore the influence of English language learning on identity (re)construction of minority Kazakh students at Chinese universities. There are three research questions guide the research. The first one is related to minority Kazakh students' English language learning experiences at universities. The second question is about their views about benefits and opportunities of English learning. The last research question is concerned with the influence of English learning on Kazakh minority students' identity (re)construction.

The study employed the interview-based qualitative approach and conducted interviews with nine participants who were Kazakh minority students at Chinese universities.

The findings have been presented in the previous section, in the chapter below I will interpret these findings within the scope of the research questions and juxtaposed with the conceptual framework and previous studies.

### **Minority Kazakh Students' English Learning Experiences at Universities.**

This section discusses the findings answering the first research question related to students' experiences of English learning at Chinese universities which were found to be both positive as well as negative.

**Finding 1.** Most participants have positive English learning experiences in terms of improved English knowledge although English majoring and non-majoring students have different classroom learning experiences, and the majority has developed autonomous learning skills by employing multiple online and offline resources, and investing in private tutoring courses.



Students reported different classroom learning experiences although they were unanimous in the view about the improvement of English knowledge in general. Non-majoring students had test-oriented classroom learning experiences, that teacher mainly applied traditional grammar-translation method instead of developing all-around language knowledge.

The finding that reflects improvement of students' grammar and vocabulary as a result of their learning experiences within the traditional grammar-translation method used by the teachers fully supports the findings from the previous research. For example, Sawir (2005) in his study about learning experiences of international students at Australian university has found that Asian way of teaching the English language was mainly prioritized on learning grammar and vocabulary and students performed well at English written tests. Such a traditional way of teaching foreign language was also described as 'scholar learning' in the study of (Brown, 2006), which focused on "grammatical rules, memorization of vocabulary and grammatical forms, translation of texts, and performance of written exercises" (p. 15).

A different learning experience was pointed out by participants who majored in the English language that their English classes were classified into various types: oral English, writing class, reading class and vocabulary learning; teachers applied various methods according to teaching contents and targets, and some teachers incorporated western cultures to make lessons more interesting. It means that traditional way is being pushed out in the international practice by the more recent constructivist approach that better prepares students for the demands of the labor market by developing their abilities not only pass the tests but to successfully function in the target language. This finding is in compliance with the study of (Hu, 2005) that English teaching method has improved during recent years in China in terms

of integrating various teaching approaches by employing audio and visual technologies in the classroom, although most formal English classes are still highly test-oriented.

The revealed findings thus show that minority students are deprived of learning English for functional use, though still they feel satisfied and being prepared for CET or TEM exams. Thus, the implication of this is the possibility that English test is over-emphasized at Chinese universities since it has a direct impact on degree achievement, and learning and teaching was more focused on passing a test rather than developing communicative language abilities. In addition, there is a need for Chinese universities have to move from traditional way to a more constructivist way of teaching provide better opportunities for students learning if they want their students to be competitive.

Another positive learning experience revealed from data analysis is connected with the development of autonomous learning skills by employing multiple online and offline resources and investing in private tutoring courses. This finding of the study echoes the claims made by Darvin and Norton (2016) that the advancement of technologies transformed the traditional ways of language acquisition and socialization, online and offline resources offered the learners vast opportunities to learn, negotiate and reconstruct the sense of who they are. Participants in this study employed various means of language learning, such as online English channels, various mobile applications, and test preparation materials. It is interesting to point out that although all participants devoted time preparing for CET, students who aimed at pursuing advanced studies favored test-oriented practices including preparing for other English tests like IELTS or TOEFL, while other students preferred practicing oral skills and expanding vocabulary base in order to read and watch English resources. A possible

explanation for such difference lies in that students adopted different language learning approaches depending on their imagined future use of the target language.

Besides, the findings of the study are partially in agreement with the study of Despagne (2015) whose study on minority students' English learning influence in Mexico revealed that minority students "created autonomous plurilingual learning strategies to integrate their knowledge of Nahual and Spanish into their learning of English" (p. 376). In my research, the minority of participants, only who attended bilingual schools in Altay, told that when taking private courses taught by KZ teachers, helped them to employ pluralistic learning approach that connects English with their linguistic knowledge in Kazakh and Chinese. While the majority of participants did not make such connection to their mother tongue (Kazakh language). And the possible reason for this discrepancy is that participants in the present study were educated mainly in Chinese schools or in the big city like Urumqi where they had been assimilated by Chinese language and culture as pointed out in some studied (Adamson and Feng 2009; May, 2013). One of the issues that emerge from these finding is that the dilemma regarding minority students' learning Chinese and English languages at the expense of their mother tongue.

**Finding 2.** Kazakh minority students also have some negative English learning experiences: insufficient language acquisition in class, poorer English knowledge background compared with Han counterparts, psychological stress stemmed from feelings of inferiority and discrimination, and problem-related with learning English through the Chinese language.

Despite the fact that these minority students developed multiple learning strategies and invested time, money and energy in learning English at universities, they had encountered some problems in terms of in-class English learning, stresses caused by poorer English

knowledge background compared with Han students and feelings of inferiority. Though some of them perceived positively learning grammar and vocabulary for being able to pass CET, still the majority of the respondents criticized such an approach. Most participants reflected that English classes paid heavy attention to grammar practices and less on practicing oral skills, besides, the classes were mainly teacher-centered and they had less language exposure to improve communication skills, described by one participant as “dumb English”. This finding was also reported by (Sawir, 2005) that Asian learners used to the didactic and teacher-centered style of teaching, “little interest in developing students as an active speaking agent” (p. 570). There are two likely causes for these findings: the first one is that most English classes at universities are oriented for passing the test (CET) rather than developing students' all-around language skills; another cause might be the size of the class was too large to involve students' participation in classroom activities.

Apart from insufficient engagement to the English language in classes, psychological stresses related to English learning was another challenge for them at universities. Students who were studying at universities located in inland cities of China, like Beijing and Wuhan, reported that they were shocked that their English background knowledge was so much poorer compared with Han students who came from inland cities. This finding is in line with those of previous studies (Adamson & Feng, 2009; Guo & Gu, 2016; Zhao, 2010) that general education quality differs very much between inland developed regions and western region in China and the English provision is very limited in Xinjiang, which means that most bilingual schools have very few or no formal English subject.

Based on participants' views, they felt stressed because of their poorer background knowledge, and this also led to another negative feeling of inferiority. Students felt that they

were somehow misperceived or labeled as 'academically incapable' because of their ethnicity. This corresponds with the studies of Cummins (2015) and Sautman (1998) that minority groups in many societies are viewed inferior by the dominant group, and in the Chinese context, as Sautman (1998) points out that "in China...the invidious stereotype is propagated of minority cadres retaining the 'backwardness' of their cultures" (p. 95). Some students studied very hard in order to "gain respect from teachers and peers", and reconstructed their identities through this process; this is partially similar to the study of (M. M. Gu & Tong, 2012) that students from mainland China studied in one international university in Hong Kong studied very hard to demonstrate that they were "high academic achievers" when "their competence was doubted due to their mainland Chinese background" (p. 511). Moreover, students felt that their linguistic and cultural background had been ignored by teachers and thus teachers rarely employed their pluralistic background in the English classes. The similar issues have also been reported in studies of Despaigne (2015), M. Gu & Patkin (2013), Nguyen & Bui (2016) and Rong(2007), as they argue that minority students' cultural and linguistic diversities are often not valued or ignored in most contexts and teachers less likely integrated their pluralistic background in teaching approaches.

On the other hand, not all students managed to chase up with Han students, minority student who graduated from a bilingual school in Altay expressed her disappointment with the progress of English language at a university in Beijing since she fell behind Han students and had difficulty in comprehending English class contents taught through Chinese. Her limited knowledge of English and Chinese seemed to be a huge hindrance that prevented her from pursuing advanced studies. These findings differ from Guo & Gu (2016) that they studied minority students who studied in high schools in inland cities (Neigaoban) and these students

had more prestigious opportunities to attain high-quality high school education. The present study focused on participants who graduated from bilingual schools in Xinjiang and reflected that their insufficient background knowledge of English placed them in unequal footing with other counterparts and even further discourage them from pursuing advanced studies. A further study with more focus on minority students who studied at bilingual schools in small towns and remotes areas in western China is therefore suggested.

Overall, minority Kazakh students in Chinese universities have experiences some difficulties of English learning due to poor background knowledge, however, most students overcame these challenges and developed autonomous learning skills by employing online and offline resources and invested in the English language for future study and career.

### **Benefits and Opportunities of English Learning**

This section discusses Kazakh minority students' various views toward benefits and opportunities of English learning with the notions of cultural capital and imagined empowerment.

**Finding 3.** For Kazakh minority students, the benefits of English learning are not limited to instrumental use like future employment or advanced studies, but also widened their knowledge and worldview, social network and opened a door for learning other languages. However, a few students also reflected that English offered the imagined empowerment with less practical function in the local society.

With respect to the second research question, it was found that Kazakh minority students perceived the English language offer opportunities for future career and advanced studies in China or abroad. As mentioned in the literature review, particularly from the

beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the status of English language has increased dramatically in China; the language is perceived as an asset with paramount cultural, social and economic values, as described by (Hu, 2005) “it is a passport to higher education at home or abroad, lucrative employment in a public or private sector, professional advancement and social prestige” (p. 6). Besides, the CET (College Entrance Examination) is valued with high credibility and validity to assess the English proficiency and students' eligibilities for degree conferral at Chinese universities (Adamson & Xia, 2011). The similar perceived benefits of English language also have been reported by Anbreen (2015), Darvin & Norton (2016), Despagne (2015) and Gu (2008) that people invested in English language learning since the language was associated with prestigious work and study opportunities. On the other hand, this reflects the hegemony of the English language in the world as well as the spread of English, as Baker (2011) claims that

“The international prestige of English and English speaking nations and the popularity of Anglo-American culture has given the English language associations of status, power and wealth. Access to English means access to valued forms of knowledge and access to affluent and prestigious social and vocational positions.” (p. 85).

This means that the benefits of the English language learning go beyond from the instrumental benefits in terms of degree and employment, most participants agreed that they had learned about the outside world by wide-range of resources in English language, and this not only expanded their worldviews but also enabled them to learn updated knowledge. Moreover, some participants noted that their social network has also been expanded by English learning as they joined conversations with international students and teachers on campus or online. This finding supports claims made by Darvin & Norton (2016) that

language learner might wish to build a relationship through the target language, and employ the language as the social capital to construct the social network. Quite an unexpected finding that was not revealed in the previous studies was that some participants acknowledged that English language learning opened the door for learning other languages and cultures. This might relate to the function of English language as lingua franca to enable minority students to be familiar with diversified languages and cultures around the world.

Surprisingly, a few students also pointed out that many people learned English in order to pass CET, IELTS or TOEFL in order to empower their resume or personal profiles for applying for jobs, but they never apply the language in their work or life. The English language plays the role as imagined empowerment with less practical functions in life and works in China. This finding partially accords the study of (Zhao, 2010) that English learning for minority Mongolian students in China offers “imagined empowerment” to shift the imbalanced relationship between the dominant group and minority group. Zhao (2010) argues that “substantial empowerment” would not exist unless the minority people’s culture and language could be incorporated into the whole educational system. Based on the idea of Bourdieu (1986) that the language as the cultural capital could be converted into social, economic and symbolic capitals based on the legitimate acceptance of the language in certain contexts. To sum up, the findings argue that English with prestigious status plays the role of the symbolic capital with more imagined empowerment instead of practical applications in local areas in China.

### **The Impact of English on Identity (re)Construction**

With respect to the third research question, this section discusses that the influence of English learning has enabled Kazakh minority students to reconstruct multicultural and global



identities, meanwhile, the English language has empowered some students to resist the inferior or marginalized position.

**Finding 4.** Under the influence of English learning, Kazakh students have promoted multicultural awareness, and some students have reconstructed multiple identities as multicultural and global identities, which created 'a third space' to surpass their ethnic and national identities and confused identity as someone in-between.

The findings of the study indicate that Kazakh minority students have promoted multicultural awareness by English learning that they learned diversified cultures and values via accessing online resources and communicating with people from other countries. They also have reflected on their own cultures and values and learned to respect and tolerate the diversity and otherness. The similar findings have also been discussed in the studies of Sung (2014) and Wu (2015) that students have reevaluated their own values and cultural beliefs through English learning and became open-minded to different values and cultures. Despite the fact that Wu (2015) investigated Chinese students who studied in British universities, and the settings in this study and Sung (2014) were inland China and Hong Kong, the similar findings suggests that in the digital world nowadays, the ways of obtaining resources and communicating have broken the territory limitations and influenced language learners' understanding of the target language and culture in transformative ways.

In the study of Sung (2014), some Hong Kong students showed their desirability of attaining the global identity which "transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries ... but did not want to reveal their local Hong Kong identities", while some students "wish to express both their global and local identities simultaneously" (p. 37). The current study seems to be partially in line with this claim as Kazakh minority students expressed their wish to be a

multicultural man or global citizen while they also wanted to maintain their ethnic identity as Kazakh.

Another interesting finding was that some participants have experienced the identity confusion as they neither fully accepted by Chinese group nor by Kazakh group and they felt like someone in-between and struggled with feelings of no belongings. In accordance with the present finding, previous studies have demonstrated that immigrant groups and minority groups often experience the identity confusion; Shin (2010) noted that second generation of immigrants in America struggled with the identity affiliation as rejected their heritage identity in order to be accepted by the dominant group and felt themselves as someone in between. This further supports the notion of identity proposed by Norton (2015) "identity is multiple, a site of struggle, and changing across time and space" (p. 37). The participants in this study have reconstructed the multiple identities as multicultural and global identities to escape limits of the national and ethnic identities, which seemed to conflict each other and struggled in-between.

This finding may be explained by the fact that minority Kazakh student who studied in Chinese mainstream schools were assimilated by the Chinese language and culture at the expense of native language, while the minority groups have not been integrated within the dominant society, which further caused the social segregation and stratification. The English language as the language of cultural capital enabled these minority students to connect with the wider society of globalized world and imagined themselves as a member of this globalized community, creating a 'third space' for them to overcome the identity struggle between the dominant and minority group. These findings corroborates the framework of the study as language learners invested in the language learning with the assistance of new technologies in

this new era have “greater autonomy” to pursue the imagined “global and interconnected community” as they “navigate diverse spaces and perform a range of identities” (Darvin & Norton, 2016, p. 34). These may help up to understand language learners' identity formation within the social practices in terms of contextual influences via modern technologies and investment in the learning. In other words, the increased mobility and accessibility to various online resources enabled the language learner to develop autonomous learning agency, and by investing in the language learning to join the imagined community and reconstruct various identities.

**Finding 5.** Most minority students were empowered by the English language to ‘resist inferior or marginalized position’ and reconstruct imagined elite identity. However, English learning disempowered student who has little previous English education in school, and this further escalated the educational inequities.

The findings of the study revealed that most minority Kazakh thought that they could reposition themselves through English learning as they felt inferior or marginalized by the dominant group in the society. They felt confident in terms of their oral English skills and innate language learning advantages as multilingual individuals. Therefore, English language with powerful language capital might balance these inequalities, offering them the ways to attain the imagined elite identity. This study partially supports findings from previous studies Gu & Patkin (2013), Guo & Gu (2016) and Groff et al. (2016) that minority groups favored the English learning as they wished to resist the inferior positions imposed on them by the dominant group. For instance, Groff et al. (2016) discovered that minority students in Quebec claimed that they were better at English than local French students and had more prospective career opportunities to resist their marginalized positions. However, the present study does not

fully support the study of Guo & Gu (2016), they found that South Asian minority students in Hong Kong schools constructed the counter-discourse to against the local language and culture and inclined to English language and western culture. This counter-discourse further marginalize these minority groups to integrate into the Hong Kong society and stayed at the peripheral circle and most of these students failed to continue higher education but inherited their parents' ways of living like girls married at early age to become housewife while boys as manual workers.

Finding of the present study demonstrates that although Kazakh minority students felt marginalized by the dominant group, they made effort to acquire the English language as cultural capital, attaining economic, social and symbolic values of the language, in order to reposition themselves and be accepted by the dominant group. This discrepancy could be attributed to the notion of negotiation of identities, as the interactions between teacher and students impact on minority students' integration into the mainstream culture (Cummins, 2015). Participants in this study noted that they made efforts in English learning to gain respect from teachers and rebuilt the self-esteem, which again strengthens their confidence. This might reflect the interaction between teacher and Kazakh minority students in Chinese universities shifted through students' involvement and investment in the language learning, and were not same as the solid stereotypical perceptions towards South Asian minorities in Hong Kong society.

Another interesting finding was that Kazakh minority students imagined themselves to attain elite identity in future and this encouraged them to invest more in the English language learning. The similar findings also noted by Despaigne (2015) and Groff et al. (2016) that minority groups in Mexico and Quebec devoted in the English language learning since that

they had envisioned themselves to attain the higher status as an elite member in the dominant society. Within the scope of the conceptual framework as 'Imagined community, investment, and identity' (Norton, 2013), the finding corroborates this notion that understands the identity-shifting through the social practices of the language learner and his or her perceived or imagined future positions related to the target language.

However, the quite contrasting finding was that minority Kazakh students who have no previous English education in schools have encountered many challenges. More specifically, they struggled to meet the requirement to pass the English test on one hand, and they found themselves could not keep up with the English classroom contents due to poor background knowledge. This issue has been reported by Han, De Costa, & Cui (2016) but they relied most on document analysis and questionnaire without paying close attention to minority students experiences and understandings. Besides, this finding is contrary to Guo & Gu (2016) who interviewed 13 Uyghur students at one inland Chinese university and found that Uyghur that minority Uyghur students were confident in English learning and had few difficulties to learn the language at Chinese university. The possible explanation for this discrepancy is that their participants were almost Uyghur minority students who received secondary education in inland Chinese cities and those from a big city like Urumqi, and these students had more privileged secondary education compared with participant in my study. Further research with more focus on minority students from remote areas in Xinjiang is therefore suggested.

To summarize, the chapter has discussed that most Kazakh minority students had positive English learning experiences at Chinese universities as they developed autonomous learning strategies and invested in the language learning by employing multiple online and offline resources, although they encountered some challenges like discrepancy in English

background knowledge compared with ethnic Chinese students. The English language enabled them to expand further study and career opportunities, widen their worldviews and promote multicultural awareness on one hand, and empowered them to reconstruct multicultural and global identities to surpass the identity confusion and attain imagined elite identity. However, the study argues that poor English background knowledge disempowered some minority Kazakh students by placing them on the unequal footing with ethnic Chinese students and further escalated educational inequities.

## **Chapter 6. Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative interview-based study was to explore the influence of English learning on minority Kazakh students' identity (re)construction at Chinese universities. For achieving those, the study aimed at understanding Kazakh minority students' English learning experiences at universities and their views about the benefits and opportunities of English learning.

The following chapter presents the conclusion obtained from this research. Based on three main research questions, three main conclusions are addressed in the chapter. These include: 1) Kazakh minority students' English learning experiences at Chinese universities; 2) Kazakh minority students' views about the benefits and opportunities of English learning; 3) The influence of English learning on Kazakh minority students' identity (re)construction. Following the conclusions, the chapter offers the recommendations for practice and policy, and acknowledges the limitations of the research and provides suggestions for further research.

### **English Learning Experiences at Chinese Universities**

The study has illustrated that minority Kazakh students in Chinese universities have both positive as well as negative English learning experiences. With respect to positive experiences, most Kazakh minority students have improved English knowledge through class learning and self-learning. Although they have encountered challenges in terms of insufficient classroom language acquisition, poor English background knowledge, and psychological stresses, most Kazakh students overcame these challenges and developed autonomous learning skills by employing online and offline resources and investing their time, money and energy in improving English language proficiency. The conclusion here implies that inequities of English education for the minority group in western China put them in disadvantaged position

at inland universities as Feng and Sunuodula (2009) claims that “learning a third language is an enormous challenge for minority students given the usually unfavorable conditions they are in” (p. 271). On the other hand, minority Kazakh students have employed multiple online and offline resources to develop autonomous learning skill and invest in English learning.

Therefore, it seems that modern technology offers learners more autonomy to access into various resources to pursue self-interest; as “blessing in disguise” by Feng & Sunuodula (2009), this might offer a solution for balancing the education inequities for minority groups in China.

### **Views about Benefits and Opportunities of English Learning**

The findings of this study indicate that most Kazakh minority students view the English learning as acquiring the cultural capital with both material and symbolic values (Bourdieu, 1986; Darvin & Norton, 2016) that might not only provide them more opportunities for further study and prospective career, but expand their social network and worldviews, open door for learning other languages as well. However, the finding also reveals that English language proficiency functions like symbolic decoration on students' resume, without functional use in everyday life and work. The conclusion here implies that language learners' views differentiate based on the future imagined connection with the target language and this also impact on their language practice and investment on the language learning.

### **The Influence of English Learning on Identity (re)Construction**

The findings of the study have demonstrated that Kazakh minority students have promoted multicultural awareness through English learning, and some students reconstructed multicultural and global identities to ‘transcend’ national and ethnic identities and promote connectedness with a global community. Besides, findings reveal that some Kazakh minority students experienced the identity confusion as ‘someone in between’, and English learning



seems to create a 'third space' for them to avoid the limits of this identity confusion that found the belongs to a wider global community or cosmopolitan culture.

Moreover, one of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that English learning empowered some Kazakh minority students to reposition themselves from inferior or marginalized positions by acquiring the cultural capital with symbolic and material values and to attain the imagined elite identity in future. The findings support the ideas that language is not only a means for communication, but for negotiation the sense of oneself in dynamic social power relations. However, it can also increase the gap between people in affluent regions with more resources and minority people from the remote places with limited resources and education opportunities.

### **Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

The findings of this study have a number of practical implications for policymakers as well as university educators.

As for policymakers, the study recommends them to take into account the issue of inequity of formal English education provision for ethnic minorities at bilingual schools, which placed the minority students on the unequal footing with ethnic Chinese students, and caused dilemma for minority students to pursuing the quality education at mainstream schools at the expense of their linguistic and cultural diversities. The policymakers are recommended to consider allocating resources in terms of teaching staff and funding for minority bilingual schools to support minority students' English language education in order to promote social cohesion and human capital investment.

Regarding to university administrators and teachers, the study implies recommendations that university administrators and teachers to offer the extra support for minority students with poor English knowledge background in terms of organizing special courses. The special policy like replacing CET by Chinese language test might seem to offer a solution for solving the issue of inequity, actually, it could not provide substantiate empowerment for minority students, even disadvantage minority students to pursue wider education and career opportunities. It is also suggested that university teachers to adopt pluralistic teaching approach by employing minority students' linguistic and cultural diversities, and living experiences as well in the classroom to create a more supportive learning environment which might benefit both dominant and minority groups to cultivate intercultural awareness.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research**

The most important limitation lies in small sample size and limited numbers of participants who attended bilingual schools in small towns. This might limit the possibilities to obtain rich data to understand experiences of minority students who have little previous English education at schools and how this limitation impacted on their identity construction. Another limitation is related to the lack of time, and this did not allow the researcher to find more participants with diverse educational backgrounds. In spite of its limitations, the study certainly adds to our understanding of the dynamic relationship between language learning and identity negotiations of minority groups in power relations with dominant society.

Therefore, for further research, it is suggested that large-scale study involving large number of participants with diverse backgrounds might offer deeper insights into minority students' English learning experiences to understand how they navigate learning process with

modern technologies and invest in the English learning to pursue the imagined community and identity shifts involved in the process. The issue of understanding identity negotiations via virtual communications with the wider world is an intriguing one which could be usefully explored in further research.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Sample Interview Protocol

Thesis title: **The influence of English language learning on identity construction and reconstruction of minority Kazakh students at universities in China**

#### Research questions:

1. What are English language learning experiences of minority Kazakh students at Chinese universities?
2. How do ethnic minority Kazakh students perceive benefits and opportunities of English learning?
3. How do Kazakh students perceive the impact of English language learning on the construction and reconstruction of their identities?

**Duration of interview:** around 40 to 50 minutes

**Date of interview:**

**Interviewer:** Sharapat

**Interviewee:**

***Thank you for your agreeing to participate in the research. To facilitate our note-taking, I would like to audio tape our conversations today only based on your permission. Please sign the consent form. For your information, only researcher on the project will be privy to the tapes which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. In addition, I kindly to request you to sign a form devised to meet our human subject requirements. Essentially, this document states that: (1) **all information will be held confidential**, (2) your **participation is voluntary** and **you may stop at any time** if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we **do not intend to inflict any harm**. Finally, I **greatly appreciate your contribution** in the present study which attempts to understand the English learning experiences of minority Kazakh students in Chinese universities and its influence on their identity construction and reconstruction.***

**Demographic information:** gender, university, major, grade, hometown.

Questions about education background and English language learning experiences:

1. Could you please tell me, what type of secondary school and primary school have you attended (minority bilingual school (min kao min), Chinese mainstream school (min kaohan) or Neigaoban), and where is it located?
2. Could you please tell me when did you formally start to learn English?
3. How do you evaluate your English proficiency level (any certificate like CET, IELTS, and TOEFL)?

**Questions based on the first main research question (English learning experience at university):**

1. For how long did or do you have English classes at your university?
2. How many periods of English classes did or do you have per week?
3. How many students were or are there in your English classes?
4. What is the medium of instruction in your English classes?
5. What do you think of your textbook for your English classes?
6. As a minority student in your English class, do you think if your teacher would pay more attention to you than your Han classmates?
7. Could you please make some comments on your English teacher and his/her classes?
8. Are you required to pass CET-4 by your university and have you ever taken it?
9. What do you think of CET-4 and the CET-4 certificate?

**Appendix B****INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

Topic of thesis: **The influence of English language learning on identity construction and reconstruction of minority Kazakh students at universities in China**

**DESCRIPTION:** You are invited to participate in a research study on exploring English language learning experiences of minority Kazakh students at Chinese universities to find out challenges and success they encounter during their learning. Besides, the study is intended to investigate how minority students' identities are constructed and reconstructed during the process of English learning. You will be asked to participate in a one-on-one face-to-face interview between you and the researcher at a public place of your choice. The interview will be semi-structured with open and closed questions, will be audio recorded in recording device only with your permission and will later be transcribed for data analysis. Data from records will be analyzed in the final report and findings will be shown at scientific meetings. After completing thesis work, tapes will be permanently destroyed. You might be invited to participate in a follow-up interview if the researcher has further questions.

**TIME INVOLVEMENT:** Your participation will take approximately 60 minutes.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** The risks associated with this study are minimal. Your personal experience related with English learning at university will not be shared with your teacher nor any member from your university. No judgement will be made based on your personal feelings or thoughts, and you have the right to refuse to answer the question which makes you feel unpleasant or stressed. The benefits which may reasonably be expected to result from this study are: better understanding about English language learning experiences of Kazakh students in Xinjiang, challenges and success they have in the process of English learning, and the influence of English language and culture on them; this study may provide some suggestions for teachers, administrators at university to provide some support for minority students in terms of English learning. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your grades at university.

**PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS:** If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. The results of this research study may be presented at scientific or professional meetings or published in scientific journals.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:**

**Questions:** If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research, its procedures, risks and benefits, contact the Master's Thesis Supervisor for this student work, Sulushash Kerimkulova, [skerimkulova@nu.edu.kz](mailto:skerimkulova@nu.edu.kz), +7(7172) 70 6144.

**Independent Contact:** If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the NUGSE Research Committee to speak to someone independent of the research team at +7 7172 709359. You can also write an email to the NUGSE Research Committee at [gse\\_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz](mailto:gse_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz)

Please sign this consent form if you agree to participate in this study.

- I have carefully read the information provided;
- I have been given full information regarding the purpose and procedures of the study;
- I understand how the data collected will be used, and that any confidential information will be seen only by the researchers and will not be revealed to anyone else;
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason;
- With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**The extra copy of this signed and dated consent form is for you to keep.**

**According to the law of the Republic of Kazakhstan an individual under the age of 18 is considered a child. Any participant falling into that category should be given the Parental Consent Form and have it signed by at least one of his/her parent(s) or guardian(s).**



## 研究同意表

### 英语教育对于哈萨克族大学生自我认同建构的影响的研究

**具体内容:** 您被邀请参加一项关于探讨英语教育对于哈萨克族大学生的自我认同建构影响的研究。您将与研究人员在您所选择的公共场所进行一对面对面访谈, 访谈将是半结构式由开放与封闭型问题构成, 所有访谈内容将记录在录音设备, 以后会将其转录进行分析。所分析的记录数据会在最终报告中呈现, 并研究发现结果会在研讨会展示。当完成论文工作后, 录音磁带将被永久销毁。如果研究人员有其他问题, 您可能被邀请参加随访。

**参加时间:** 您将参与大约为60分钟。

**风险和益处:** 与本研究相关的风险是若提及过去生活经历中敏感问题可能会影响参加者。如果所提任何问题属于敏感问题, 您可选择不回答。这项研究可以预期合理的好处是有助于社会充分理解哈萨克族少数民族学生在内地大学学习英语的经历与感受。您所决定是否参加这项研究不会影响您在学校的成績。

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**联系方式信息:**

**问题:** 如果您对本研究, 其程序, 风险和福利有任何问题, 疑虑或投诉, 请联系硕士论文主管, SulushashKerimkulova, skerimkulova@nu.edu.kz, +7(7172) 70 6144。

**独立联系人:** 如果您对本研究如何进行感到不满意, 或者您对研究或您作为参与者的权利有任何疑问, 投诉或一般问题, 请联系NUGSE研究委员会, 单独与研究团队成员通话方式+7 7172 709359.您也可以写一封电子邮件到NUGSE研究委员会。

[gse\\_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz](mailto:gse_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz)

如果您同意参与本研究，请签署此同意书。

- 我仔细阅读了提供的信息;
- 我已获得关于研究目的和程序的全部信息;
- 我已了解如何使用收集的数据，任何机密信息将仅由研究人员看到，不会向任何其他人透露;
- 我明白我可以随时退出研究，而无需给出理由;
- 在充分了解所有上述内容后，我同意自己的意愿，参加本研究。

签署: \_\_\_\_\_ 日期: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix C**

## Data Sample (Transcription of Interview)

December 4, 2017

*(S stands for interviewer, P1 stands for interviewee)*

S: So, do you think that CET/TEM has caused some pressure for you and took a large amount of time for preparation?

P1: Yes, TEM-8 has caused some pressure, and I really studied very hard in order to pass it. It tests mainly the translation skills as well as writing skills that I have spent the whole semester practicing these skills.

S: What do you think about English language proficiencies of Han students, and do they have difficulties of passing CET/TEM?

P1: Generally, they have more solid foundation in terms of grammar and vocabulary, so the test was not so difficult for most of them.

S: Do you think your English class performance affect your general academic performance and other subjects learning, if yes, can you tell me how?

P1: It was my major during the bachelor years, but currently I am majored in public policy, and I have studied my second master year in Australia, where I have improved my English so much. Thus, English proficiency has little impact for my other subjects, and it has been helpful for other subjects since I can read materials and books of my field in original English version.

S: Do you get any certificates of English language during university study; if yes, do you consider it as a success?

P1: Yes, I consider that TEM-8 was a success for me, and I have passed the IELTS and enrolled in master program and got the scholarship for studying abroad, these are all my success related with English.

S: Could you please tell that other success you have had related with English learning?

P1: Well, more I have learned about English, more proficient I become, that I can watch English films and read all kinds sources in English. What's more, I can talk with foreign teachers and students on campus, I do like communicating with them.

S: Could you please tell me that how do you think of English learning in today's society?

P1: In China, English language in schools pay too much attention on grammar learning, less on the communication abilities, and the teaching method is mainly teacher-centered, that it likes analyzing the language rather than learn and apply the language. You know, this is called the 'dumb English', this term describes Chinese students' English learning phenomenon.

S: Have you invested in English learning, and how? (Probing question: private English language training, and why attend?)

P1: Yes, I have invested most of my time at university learning English by myself, like listening to the BBC programs and reading books. The reasons for that are that I like this language and I want to go abroad and study abroad, I want to be proficient and confident in English language.