
Common Topic, Similar Hope: Positioning of Chinese International Students Abroad

Jessica Fox
Second Language Studies, Michigan State University
foxjess3@msu.edu

Abstract

As the number of Chinese international students at higher education institutions continues to grow, relevant research on this topic is increasingly vital. A number of studies expose academic and social challenges impeding this population's adjustment to university landscapes in Canada and the United Kingdom, yet few shed light on positive strategies used to successfully navigate students' sojourns abroad, particularly in the United States. This case study provides an in-depth, detailed account of a Chinese international student's first year at a large American university. Data collected from regular interviews, classroom observations, and instructor insights are analyzed through the lens of the Positioning theory to explore how a student strategically positions himself on the path toward realizing his goals and imagined community. Implications of this study advocate for a multifaceted, reflective approach to study abroad by students, faculty, and administrators.

Keywords: Case study, ESL, international students, higher education, Positioning

The number of international students studying at English-speaking Western universities increases each year. At the university in this present study, for instance, the Chinese international student population has more than doubled in the past five years (Office for International Students and Scholars, 2014). Because of this large influx of students and the unified need for international students to be adequately prepared for academic and non-academic aspects of life from multiple university constituents (i.e., faculty members, student life administrators, residence program staff), it is critical to investigate the transition into new academic and social terrains for this growing population. The focus of the current study is how one first-year Chinese international student navigates his new environment and how his story may inform the growing population of not only Chinese international students but also international students in general.

Social and Academic Challenges

A commonplace assumption of study abroad participants may be seamless integration and immersion into the language and culture of the target community; unfortunately, this is not always the case. It is too simple to assign culture, language, social norms, or personality as the source of the discrepancy between study abroad dreams and realities; regardless of the combination of factors for each individual, most previous research categorizes ensuing challenges into areas of social and academic challenges.

On the academic front, a study by Liu (2013) suggested that Chinese international students at universities in the United States had “tremendous difficulties in using English” (p. 138). Other researchers corroborate this claim: Chinese international students are unprepared for writing courses (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Liou, 2014), have difficulties comprehending academic lectures (Miller, 2014), and have

inadequate oral skills in English (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Ranta & Meckelborg, 2013). Lower language proficiency may be part of other academic challenges identified in the literature: academic culture shock (Liu, 2013), foreign language anxiety (Liu & Jackson, 2008), low willingness to communicate (Lu & Hsu, 2008), and difficulties with Western-style collaboration (Luxin, 2010). In sum, we cannot conclude that inadequate language proficiency skills plague all international students' academic adjustment; however, this is an area of concern for universities.

In the social realm, Chacon (1999) found that many international students reported having not even one meaningful relationship with a domestic student during the course of their whole academic program abroad. Chinese participants studying in the UK mentioned the most overwhelming aspect was not “the endeavor to handle a different teaching style, but a psychological and physical struggle to live with an entirely different life pattern” (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006, p. 82); study participants frequently cited boredom and isolation as part of their study abroad experience. Ranta and Meckelborg (2013) quantified Chinese international graduate students' exposure to English in naturalistic settings during the first six months at a Canadian university and found that students spent a meager average of 46 minutes a day actively interacting in English.

Factors impacting the lack of full integration among domestic and international students are numerous. Huang & Brown (2009) suggested factors such as international students' insufficient English communication skills, the perceived disinterest or impatience of domestic students, the lack of time due to academic demands, and the lack of shared common interests with domestic students. Five years later, a study by Lehto, Cai, Fu, and Chen (2014) confirmed and expanded such conclusions with focus group data collected from domestic and international students. To summarize, the data revealed that interactions among domestic and international students are plentiful; nevertheless, dialogue and integration are challenged due to paralleled social networks, language barriers and cultural barricades, and unclear potential benefits for the risk of reaching out. Although Lehto et al.'s (2014) focus group reports on the seemingly hopeless struggle for understanding and meaningful interactions among domestic and international students, there is research revealing a more successful picture of international student integration.

Positive Strategies

Only a few studies have focused on positive strategies used to adapt academically and socially to their new environments. Some of the strategies mentioned were related to developing a sense of creative adaptability (Rastall, 2006), agency (Clark & Gieve, 2006), self-directed discipline (Gieve & Clark, 2005), self-responsibility and independence (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006). Liu (2013) found that international students relied on translation and mediation with more competent peers as they adjusted to the different demands of their host country (Liu, 2013). One particular growing strategy for domestic and international students alike is the use of social media for both academic and social purposes. Chinese international students in particular are utilizing social media platforms unfamiliar to the American social media landscape. WeChat, the Chinese version of WhatsApp, is a platform that may both facilitate and restrict learning, and as will be demonstrated in the findings, this tool offers both social and academic benefits and risks for Chinese international students within language-learning and content-based classrooms (Hafner et al., 2013; Thorne et al., 2015).

The Present Study

This study is motivated by the need to document typical and atypical phenomena involving Chinese international students in the United States. A longitudinal, descriptive approach will capture nuanced development over time. Drawing on the findings from studies in the United Kingdom and Canada regarding the Chinese international student population, this study will investigate the question of whether this population encounters similar or different experiences in the United States. It is my aim to offer an in-depth and detailed qualitative analysis of a first year Chinese international student and the social and academic strategies he employs in order to navigate his own position with his future and those around him.

Theoretical Framework: Positioning Theory

Positioning Theory takes center stage as the theoretical framework in the present study. Grounded in discursive social psychology, discourse analysis, and Austin's theory of speech acts (1965), Positioning Theory examines how one locates oneself (reflexive) and others (interactive) with rights and obligations in and through talk (Davies & Harré, 1990). Reflexive positioning is how a person describes, or positions, oneself; for instance, one may state, "*I am a self-disciplined student and work hard to earn my grades.*" The other kind of positioning that will be employed in the current study is interactive positioning: what a person says that positions oneself in relation to the other person. An example of this would be a person saying, "*My classmates are not as self-disciplined or hard-working as I am.*"

The term *positioning* departs from its predecessor, *role*, and its scripted constraints of social roles and moves toward a more narrative approach. The Positioning Theory framework was selected to analyze the current data because it embraces the dynamic, longitudinal and discourse-focused data collected for this study, allowing for realistic accounts of the "fluid, dynamic and context-dependent" development over time (Kayi-Aydar, 2014). Through the lens of Positioning Theory, the participant of the current study will be represented in a multidimensional analysis of discourse that respects the complexity of his context, experiences, and attitudes.

Second language acquisition (SLA) research on positioning continues to grow (Anderson, 2009; De Costa, 2011; Kayi-Aydar, 2014; Kinginger, 2008; Norton, 2013). Kayi-Aydar (2012) utilized the Positioning Theory in the language-learning classroom, and noted that students' positioning can have either facilitative or restrictive access to meaningful language experiences or opportunities. In her 2014 article, Kayi-Aydar explored how two English as a Second Language (ESL) students communicated at the micro and macro levels in a classroom and concluded that each student's positioning strategy impacted their ultimate acceptance or marginalization. Through the use of the Positioning Theory, Kayi-Aydar has offered realistic suggestions for language instructors to increase their awareness of classroom interpersonal dynamics. Similarly, De Costa's (2011) case study described how language beliefs and positioning impacted the learning outcomes of an immigrant ESL student from China in a Singaporean secondary school, and he urged future research to investigate learner beliefs and positioning through a longitudinal ethnographic lens in order to evaluate the impact of the larger sociopolitical context on the school's curriculum and classroom culture. In the same vein, Anderson (2009) employed the Positioning Theory to explore classroom interactions and

curricular materials from an integrated micro-, meso-, and macro-social perspective. She found a close link between identity and positioning and noted their shared purposes of capturing the trajectories of learners' emerging and recurring sense of selves in relation to people and the world around them.

The present study expands the notion of positioning from earlier classroom-focused studies to a more comprehensive examination of the participant's reflexive and interactive positions both inside and out of the classroom throughout his first year at an American university. This case study is guided by the following questions:

- RQ1. How does a Chinese international student position himself reflexively?
- RQ2. How does a Chinese international student position himself interactively with others?
- RQ3. What strategies does a Chinese international student use to navigate academic and social life in the United States?

Methodology

Context

The site of this case study is a large Midwestern university where the Chinese international student population has more than doubled in the last five years, from 1,993 students in the 2009-2010 academic year to 5,363 students in the 2013-2014 academic year (Office for International Students and Scholars, 2014). Implications of this population growth continue to emerge across the campus, and a number of university programs such as the university's Intensive English Program (IEP), the English department's pre-college writing program, the Office of International Students and Scholars, among a number of other discipline-specific programs, are seeking ways to serve this population's diverse range of academic and social needs.

Participant

Freddy (a pseudonym) was born in the Anhui Province, west of Shanghai. At the time of the study, he was over 18 years old and spoke Mandarin as his first language. When I met Freddy for the first time, he had just moved to the United States after graduating from high school in July to participate in the university's Intensive English Program's (IEP) eight-week summer academic preparation program before the start of the academic school year. He began his first year of university that fall, lived in an on-campus dormitory with a Chinese roommate, and participated in both English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and mainstream courses: computer science, calculus, nutrition, and macroeconomics. His intended major was business, but he was especially interested in information technology (IT).

I received permission to interview Freddy from the associate director of the university's IEP. This research project was IRB approved, and Freddy signed a consent form after reading and discussing it with a Chinese-speaking member of the research team. This Chinese graduate student and member of the research team joined each of the interviews as a cultural and linguistic broker (Duff, 2008, p. 137). Freddy gladly participated in conversations and appeared to be excited to share about his progress, concerns, and successes throughout the academic school year. At the start of the school year, I informed him that I had no influence upon the grades he

received in his courses; additionally, before I observe him in a number of his classes, I received both permission from Freddy and his instructors. I did not participate as a tutor for any of his academic classes, but told him I would be happy to discuss transitioning to college life and other topics such as time management.

Due to the nature of this case study, in which meaning and position are so critically investigated, I must also note my role as the researcher. I am a domestic graduate student and English is my first language. This position, no doubt, may have veiled me from full understanding and faulty interpretation during the course of interviews with Freddy.

Data Collection

The case study methodology is suitable for exploring the proposed research questions because it captures holistic, detailed information from Freddy's responses to the various social, educational and linguistic settings in which he participated. The case study methodology offers a flexible framework through which the researcher can tailor the topic of study, ranging from language proficiency development of their participants (Hatch, 1978; Huebner, 1983; Ioup, Boustagui, El Tigi, & Moselle, 1994; Larsen-Freeman, 2006) to language users' shifting identities and interactions (Norton, 2000; Valdéz, 1998; Willett, 1995).

Data collection follows Wolcott's (1994) mnemonic for ethnographic qualitative research: *experiencing* (participant observation), *enquiring* (interviewing), and *examining* (studying documents) (Duff, 2008, p. 128). Table 2 details the data collection process.

Table 1
Data collection

| Methods | Collection period (Sept. 2014—May 2015) | Data |
|---|--|--|
| Enquiring: Interviews | 8 Focal student interviews | Field notes Audio-taped: average time 45 min. |
| | 2 Instructor interviews | Field notes Audio-taped: average time 15 min. |
| Experiencing: Classroom observations | 2 each semester | Field notes |
| Examining: Artifacts | Ongoing | Written work, course syllabi, and assignments |

The bulk of data comes from eight semi-structured interviews that lasted an average of 45 minutes each. The interview is recognized as a social practice, co-constructed with the researchers (Barkhuizen, 2013; Talmy, 2010). Interview questions were cyclical and open-ended in order to track Freddy's changes in attitudes and behaviors; see Appendix A for sample interview questions. Interview recording instruments were the Garage Band recording system on the researcher's laptop computer and the iPhone voice recorder as a backup.

Additionally, four classroom observations, two instructor interviews, and artifacts such as course syllabi and writing assignments were routinely collected to supplement the interview data for a holistic understanding of Freddy's daily academic and social activities. For the purpose of

the current study, interview data with Freddy and one of his instructors was used because of their complementary content.

Data Analysis

Over seven hours of spoken English interaction were transcribed verbatim to provide an authentic and readable account (Duff, 2008, p. 157). Interviews were inductively coded for emergent themes such as imagined self, friendship, cultural adaption, future goals, technology, and relationships with parents. This recursive movement among themes, data, and theoretical framework is the defining artwork of qualitative analysis (Duff, 2008), what Davies and Harré (1990) describe as “a conversation in which is created a braided development of several story lines” (p. 50).

Findings

Reflexive Positioning

To review, reflexive positioning is how a person positions himself in and through discourse. Most prominent in Freddy’s reflexive positioning statements were regarding his current identity and imagined future.

Current identity. From the first to the last interview, Freddy described himself as a quiet, shy, and hard-working student who sat in the front of class, read the textbook before class, took notes during lectures, and reviewed the PowerPoint slides after class. He recognized that his self-discipline and interest in Information Technology were more than that of his peers. In addition to being enrolled university courses, he reported spending his free time independently studying computer languages such as Java and HTML. Early in the first semester, Freddy downplayed this self-determination and work ethic, exemplified in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 1: I’m lazy and shy

(Interview 3, October, lines 636-643)

AUTHOR *Okay. Do you ever talk to the professor?*

Freddy¹ *No.*

A *No?*

F *I’m so shy. ((Laughter))*

A *What are you afraid of?*

F *Uh, I don’t afraid of anything but, is, I’m lazy and shy.*

In the above excerpt, Freddy describes, or positions, himself as a shy and lazy student. In actuality, however, one of Freddy’s ESL instructors reported Freddy being an industrious and motivated student. She stated, “*he already has that motivation and, uh, outgoing kind of attitude*” (Interview with instructor A, November, 10:45 minute). When Freddy noted his shyness and laziness in his interview with me, it became evident that Freddy’s reflexive

¹ From this point on, all interview participants will be coded with their first initial: F=Freddy, A=author.

positioning was skewed, at least at the beginning of his school year when he may have not had enough experience to know that his laziness was actually diligence.

Excerpt 2: Shy and uncomfortable

(Interview 8, April, lines selected from 163-169)

- A *What are your impressions of international students on campus?*
- F *Hm, they are shy and yeah, to talk with the Americans, but they are more willing to communicate with the international students I think. And hm, some of them, I think, they are, hm, working hard on the study, yeah, they maybe have, uh, less parties and, like the organization activities, yeah...*
- A *Is that true for you?*
- F *Uh, I'm talking about myself ((laughter)).*
- A *((Laughter)) But do you, do you see yourself as shy and uncomfortable to talk with domestic students?*
- F *Yeah, I, in fact, I'm more willing to talk with international students because, um, we have the same situation, yeah, we are not good at English, so yeah, we are same, almost.*

In this excerpt, Freddy described himself as shy and uncomfortable. He aligned himself along with the other international students here, unified by their alleged limited English skills. This calls into question what, beyond language skills, drew international students together to “*have the same situation...we are same, almost.*” Furthermore, it is intriguing that Freddy shares this conversation with me, a domestic native English speaker. Once again, this contradiction demonstrates that Freddy adopted a self-deprecating reflexive position versus one that communicates his strengths and courage in his new environment.

Imagined self. Freddy frequently extended his reflexive position to include his imagined self and community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Although the current university is ranked high for business, he wanted to transfer to a university in California for a number of reasons. He said he was seeking a school with higher rankings in the IT field than his current university, and he would like to be geographically closer to Silicon Valley and high school classmates attending universities there. Toward this end, he intentionally prepared himself to be an attractive transfer applicant by earning high grades, seeking opportunities to work on campus, and visiting California universities during spring break. At the end of the first semester, Freddy presented his “blueprint” for conquering his second semester: “*the first goal is get high GPA...above 3.5. And, uh, I'm prepared for transferring to other school... And um, yeah, maybe to make lot of friends, and um, if I have free time...*” (Interview 5, December, lines 98-103). Freddy’s strategy for accomplishing his goals was revealed in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 3: More focused on the study

(Interview 5, December, lines 416-420)

- F *And um, maybe the next year I will to, um, um, more focused on the study, because I think this year, uh, sometimes, I waste some times with, like, um, entertain? And, I, I think it's, it's time, I should waste it, yeah, I should focus more on study. Hm.*

- A *So, what would that look like for you, to be more focused? What changes would you make?*
- F *Hm, Maybe like, um, ((pause)) uh, oh, prepare the lessons before class,*
- A *Hm,*
- F *And review the lessons after class, yeah. And, mm, maybe to, to, take more long time, a long time, to make me clam-, calm down before the exam, and prepare it. Uh, every time I prepare it, it's just for one night, I, I think it's not enough if I want to get a high score.*

In the above excerpt, Freddy notes that he wants to be more focused on his studies and waste less time for entertainment. He noted that he could prepare more before his classes and calm down before exams. This reveals his self-awareness and high level of conscientiousness.

In response to the first research question about how Freddy reflexively positioned himself, we can see that he had a humble approach to his self-conception, mature self-awareness and willingness to invest in the people, real or imagined, that were “*helpful for [his] future*” (Interview 5, December) (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Freddy defined himself as a responsible, disciplined and shy international student whose English language skills were still in need of improvement. Instead of dwelling on his current self-perceived limitations, Freddy courageously positioned and prepared himself for his future self in California and beyond. He was confident of his capability to develop the proper plan of action and work hard to realize his ideal future. It may not be a typical assumption that a first year domestic or international university student holds the ability for such honest assessment of one’s areas of improvement and the creative resourcefulness to compensate and develop. Freddy’s strong reflective skills served him well in and out of the classroom, which was evidenced by the fact that he did not avoid the unknown math problem, excel formula problem set, or an ambiguous American slang phrase.

Interactive Positioning

We now turn our attention to how Freddy employed Interactive positioning throughout the course of his first year at an American university. Different from the previously discussed and exemplified reflexive positions, interactive positioning is the way a person positions himself vis-à-vis other people in and through discourse. I will focus on how Freddy displays this Interactive positioning with parents and peers.

Parents. Some argue that parents of Chinese international students strongly influence their children’s educational path (Bodycott, 2009). Initially, it appeared as though Freddy’s major in business was an act of obedience versus his own choice: “*Sometimes, I think I will choose the IT, but my father thinks, uh, that business is more suitable to find a job, more easier to find job, so I chose the business major, but I’m interested in IT*” (Interview 1, September, line 192). Throughout the year, however, Freddy verified that his father’s suggestion was not an obligatory command. In November, Freddy shared, “*Mm, my parents, I think, they are open-mind...And, uh, they always let me do some important decisions by myself. They think I should be independent,...And, uh, they didn’t decide my major, even the finance, but they suggest me to study the finance major,*” (Interview 4, November, lines selected from 990-996). The words decide versus suggest will have to be left up to the interpretation of the reader, but Freddy claims that his rationale to major in business goes beyond acquiescing to his parents’ wishes. He desires

to situate himself among a network of imagined business friendships. In order to test his claim, I prompted Freddy to simply imagine life had he decided to change his major to IT, Freddy responded:

Excerpt 4: Far away from people

(Interview 5, December, lines 238-242)

F *Uh, I didn't think, I, I can change my major. Firstly, my father and mother hope I, uh, my major is business. And secondly, I think business is helpful for future, yeah, because it has a wide, wide range, and um, I'm not worry about to get a work, get a job, so I think, um, it's very important, I don't think I should change it.*

A *Right, but what if?*

F *If I change, change to what? Like, computer science? Uh, ((pause)) maybe, ((laughter)), uh, I, I can, cannot get so many friends, uh, because I think, hm, IT, the people who study about computer science, they are, um, far away from people that,*

A *Mm.*

F *...they are most interesting on the computer, instead of their friends.*

In this excerpt, Freddy states that he chose his major because of its wide range of possibility for a job in the future. He could barely even consider changing his major from business, what his parents had suggested, to another major such as computer science because he considers IT people to be less social. It appears as though Freddy values relationships and networking over pursuing something that may be of more intrinsic interest to him.

Friends. The topic of friends naturally emerged from first interview to the last. One of his goals of studying in the United States was to find “the best American friend” and meet people in his major. The following excerpt offers a snapshot of Freddy’s initial goals during his time abroad.

Excerpt 5: To make the best friend

(Interview 1, September, lines 147-150)

A *Okay. So, in addition to graduating from [this university], what other goals do you have during your time of living in the United States? Are they all academic?*

F *Hmm. The first thing actually is academic, and I wanna to touch some American friends, and uh, to make the best friend with them, and uh, uh, I hope I can meet some people in my major and uh like the IT major, because I'm interest in the IT, like the WeChat, these things. Yeah.*

A *Okay, so how do you think you can become closer, or have connection with students here?*

F *I think I can be closer but, uh, it's not I think very easy, and I should make progress and, uh, uh, step-by-step to, to, be suitable.*

Freddy shares that beyond academic success, his goal was to make American friends. This was a challenge for him, though, because communication with domestic students was limited to short interactions in the hallways and classroom. Freddy noticed his inability to access deeper talk and

finally allocated this to different cultures and a lack of similar interests and because he was “*shy and afraid of the language*” (Interview 1, September, line 110). This excerpt is representative of how many international students feel when they imagine their future life at a Western university; they desire to have friendships with students from the host institution (Chacon, 1999).

Not only did Freddy want to make American friends, he was also eager to connect with other Chinese international students for the possibility of developing long-term professional relationships. In the following excerpt, Freddy describes the type of Chinese students he is seeking to befriend.

Excerpt 6: I wanna make some elite friends

(Interview 5, December, selected lines from 173-212)

F *Uh, firstly, I wanna make some Chinese friends because they're helpful for my future like in China...and secondly, I wanna make some international and American friends to, um, to, uh, let me think...*

A *So when you talk about wanting to make Chinese friends, what, what kind of Chinese friends do you want to make? Because there are many different kinds of people.*

F *Um, I, I don't like to play games, like computer games like this...so, I wanna make some friends which is, um, who is, hm, have some abilities, like they are good at their business and good at um, like, computer science...Yeah, I wanna make some, elite, is that this word?*

A *It's a great word...Have you found any elite friends here?*

F *Hm, not yet. Yeah,*

A *Oh really.*

F *Uh because, um, now lots of my friends like play computer games ((laughter)). I feel boring, they always play computer games, all of day...I'm not hate them... Just I don't like play this.*

A *So you want to make some Chinese friends who have skills, and who are elite...and who are focused maybe on developing business or computer science.*

F *Yep, some Chinese people go abroad just for, uh, entertain, and I wanna to make some friends who's studying here, yeah.*

Freddy seeks friends that are elite, good at their business, good at computer skills, and are committed to studying—versus entertaining themselves. This desire shifted throughout the school year when Freddy recognized that developing friendships with Americans and elite students was harder than expected; as a result, his attention shifted toward building his own personal skillset in preparation for an imagined community elsewhere. Excerpt 7 below reveals this shift.

Excerpt 7: To make me, myself stronger

(Interview 6, lines selected from 300-310)

A *Yeah. Have things changed?*F *Uh, a little bit changed because, now, uh, now I wanna to, to make me, myself stronger, ...and um, such as, take the job...to training, the, uh, computer skills...Yeah, and, um, and I'm looking for work to make some elite friends, but it's not easy, so, I'm waiting for a chance,*A *Where do you think this chance will happen?*F *Um, maybe sometimes by accident...maybe when I transfer to other schools...yeah, I, I'm looking forward to make some friends which, who have some, um, common view with me...and, and some common topic, uh, similar hope.*

On the social front, Freddy's hope of finding the best American friend within his first year of study has yet to be realized. Although Freddy carries a sense of social dissatisfaction in his current situation, he notes that he still is "looking forward to make some friends which, who have some, um, common view...common topic...similar hope." He knows he is seeking elite, skilled, and academically serious friends and believes that this caliber of friendship is attainable in his imagined community in California. The fact that Freddy desires friends to share such similar interests and beliefs displays his high level of self-awareness and ability to reflect upon his own goals and values.

Despite Freddy's less than ideal social situation, he has developed relationships with a small group of Chinese international students. He met them when responding to their request for help with the university network system on WeChat and began to join them for dinners at the cafeteria and pick-up basketball games. Next year they will all share an apartment together. These are his "*real friends*," the ones with whom he has daily contact, shares meals, and exchanges information about current events and the stock market (Interview 8, April, lines 77, 100). This demonstrates that Freddy has found social connection with students from his home country, one of the positive strategies assist an international student's transition to a new host country (Liu, 2013).

Classmates. Although Freddy reports that interactions with domestic students are limited, he frequently mentioned relationships with other international students developed in the English Language Center (ELC) courses. For instance, one of his course instructors highlighted Freddy's collaborative leadership, saying:

Excerpt 8: He's become a great example

(Interview with instructor A, November, 6:00 minute)

His personality is such that he is a very obedient person, and very conscientious, and outgoing, and he is outgoing in the sense of finding people who are like him, and he has created a group, there's a group of 4 or 5 of them, depending on the day, that are all very studious, conscientious, kind, caring individuals, but really dedicated to being obedient and showing that they are good students and want to learn. They've gravitated to each other and feed each other that way. So in the classroom, he's created this little sub-group of studious... student A and Freddy just all hold it together as a group. For the classroom, what's nice is that they really show that nature, that studious, dedicated kind

of nature for the class, so he's become a great, as a teacher, he's become a great example to show other students who are struggling.

Throughout the year, Freddy literally positioned himself among the other international students in his ELC courses, often a challenge due to the fact that the majority of students were from China. He mentioned that he preferred to sit with international friends from Brazil, Singapore, and Indonesia and away from the other Chinese students because he wanted to “train” his English skills (Interview 6, January, selected lines from 354-372).

In addition to intentionally positing himself among international students in his ESL courses, Freddy was also an active networker within his Chinese peer group in his mainstream courses. On many occasions, he spoke of recruiting Chinese classmates to join course-specific WeChat groups, a virtual space where students can communicate about assignments, test preparation, and other course-related details. Initially, he reported a relatively peripheral participant position in his economics WeChat group saying, “*I just get some information...about the exam, the test*” (Interview 3, October, lines selected from 418-420), and later mentioned he was happy to assist classmates in other classes, “*Yeah, sometimes. Uh, like the ESL and math and, many people ask me questions about some class. Yeah...help each other*” (Interview 3, October, lines 623-627). Eventually, however, Freddy’s helpfulness would be misused and challenge his underlying assumption that classmates help one another.

The second semester proved to be more challenging, and Freddy’s WeChat activity increased, particularly in his computer science course. At first he asked questions from his peers, but quickly realized he was the one assisting classmates who “*don't want to study themselves...rely on the other students*” (Interview 7, March). At the peak of this helpfulness, Freddy was assisting between 10-20 classmates both on WeChat and face-to-face. Most of these help sessions lasted 5-10 minutes, but once he spent four hours with a classmate before the first exam. Eventually, he grew fatigued of this and was convinced that “*the process to study is to search by yourself*” (Interview 7, March, line selected from 289). And right before the year’s final exam time, Freddy’s position among his classmates in the computer science course shifted once again. He felt taken advantage of by the other students who needed his help, but once he pulled away from the WeChat group in order to work by himself, the other students marginalized him. The excerpt below details how these events caused Freddy to feel awkward and forced him to reevaluate peer relationships.

Excerpt 9: He felt very awkward

(Interview 8, April, selected from lines 50-100)

Y *He was really willing to help people in the beginning, but then once you start, like, rejecting people, you kinda feel it's your fault, which put him in a very awkward position... So, if you're that person who's use to getting help from you, then once you start to reject them, they're kind of think that it's your fault, you're not a good person anymore, you're not going to contact you. And so, he said, after he started rejecting them, they don't even say hi to him in class...*

F *Yeah, and I think it's weird that lots of people, they don't consider about the questions, the problems. They just ask their friends, yeah, have no, um, I think they have no, consideration independent, yeah...actually, I just feel painful because I do help them a lot, but if you stop to help them, then yeah...*

- A *So, next semester, in coming times when you are in classes, and the opportunity comes to help people or be part of a WeChat group, what do you think you'll do?*
- F *Um, in fact, all of these people are not my real friends in my real life, so I don't think it will influence me a lot, so I just, if someone has a big problem, um, I think he, actually, he can't deal with this problem himself, I will help him a little bit, yeah...Just help my real friends ((Laughter)).*

Freddy, in his motivated and collaborative spirit, wanted to assist his classmates with their homework, but when he began to withdraw from helping them he was not treated well. This was a difficult situation for Freddy because his identity as a successful student was both an advantage and a burden. Although Freddy's experience of social exclusion is undesirable, it demonstrates his active positioning as a resilient and independent student who recognized real versus opportunity-seeking friends.

In response to the second research question, how Freddy positioned himself interactively, we can see that Freddy's positioning allowed him to evaluate relationships based upon their importance and potential helpfulness for his future self and imagined community. In regards to his relationship with his parents, Freddy was dedicated to honoring them. While he acknowledged their suggestion to pursue a degree in business, he stated that he owns the decision. Academically, Freddy placed himself near international classmates in ELC classes to train his English skills and avoid speaking Mandarin with his Chinese classmates. Once again, Freddy revealed his ability to position himself among his ideal community of English speakers and challenge himself to interact with other international, non-Mandarin speaking classmates. And finally, Freddy's experience of social exclusion is certainly an undesirable one, but it demonstrates his active positioning as a resilient and independent student who recognized real versus opportunity-seeking friends.

Discussion

When held up against similar cases that have been documented in the literature, Freddy's case reveals more incongruities than commonalities. As previously mentioned, we cannot expect that all challenges surrounding international students' transition described in the background section are applied across the board to the Chinese international student population; moreover, Freddy's success as a first-year Chinese international student can be highlighted as an outlier against the common narrative of struggling international students (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Ranta & Meckelborg, 2013). Freddy worked hard to do his best academically and socially. Freddy's case resembles the findings of Huang & Brown (2009) and Lehto et al. (2014) that presented potential reasons for distance between international and domestic students. They found the definitive lack of integration and relationships formed among domestic and international students was due to parallel social lives, language and cultural barriers, and simply a low-risk approach to encountering and welcoming diversity. We see in Freddy's case, however, that he was intentional and aware of building relationships with a number of student groups on campus.

In response to the third research question, Freddy's strategic use of social media in and out of the classroom led to mixed results. He actively recruited classmates to join course-specific WeChat groups and created a Facebook group with his international non-Chinese classmates in ELC courses. He frequently shared his dream of developing his own smart phone application, ongoing networking activities with social media owners, and extracurricular independent studies

for computer programming. This evidence points toward Freddy's personal agency, resourcefulness and willingness to search for the answer, the proper "*process of study*" (Interview 7, March, line 288). Freddy's commitment to adapt, collaborate, communicate in and out of the classroom, and take initiative in fulfilling his needs for future academic and career development. For instance, Freddy's desire to transfer to a university in California motivated him to start working in the university cafeteria for more casual and professional interactions with native English speakers, further demonstrating his agency and self-discipline to manage his time, energy, and coursework in preparation for taking on more responsibility. Finally, Freddy's experience with WeChat and his computer science classmates, however unfortunate, confirmed his awareness of his position as a diligent and helpful student, and the potential for this position to be quickly and unknowingly taken advantage of.

Pedagogical Implications

Just as Freddy naturally positioned himself for successful academic and social encounters, English language instructors and international student administrators can raise awareness to incoming international students of their personal agency. One helpful practice may be for international students to keep a study abroad journal in which they note the personal strengths and resources they possess, the areas in which they need assistance or are challenged, opportunities for growth and discovery, and practical steps toward the realization of goals and opportunities (Jackson, 2011).

Next, as the world continues to grow closer by the simple click of a button, we can work toward a more holistic integration of international students into the English language-learning classroom through productive use of social media (Hafner et al., 2013; Thorne et al., 2015). At the same time, however, Freddy's experience with the computer science WeChat group serves as an example of the risks of social media in the academic realm. For instance, there are instructors who are present in a class' WeChat group to monitor and provide clarification. This may serve as another medium through which English language practice can enter students' daily social media platforms.

Limitations

Ten months of data collection is just the beginning of a truly longitudinal study of Freddy's continually developing sojourn. In order to get a fuller understanding of this student's transition, interviews with Freddy would continue throughout his undergraduate career. This would provide us with ample evidence to understand the strategies he employed over the course of years; furthermore, Freddy would have the opportunity to reflect back on his initial comments and goals from his first year and describe the continuing shifts in his reflexive and interactive positioning.

Next, Freddy does not travel this international student journey alone. Another limitation is this report's sole focus on Freddy's positioning versus giving voice to those with whom he journeys. To boost the reliability of this data, information from Freddy's peers and instructors would have been collected and integrated.

Finally, as is the nature of case study research, the mass of data collected cannot be represented in one report. Future studies could analyze Freddy's English language skill development through his ESL and mainstream classroom assignments. More specifically, a

focused investigation of Freddy's simultaneous enrollment in two writing courses may shed light on similarities and differences of first year preparatory writing courses offered from different departments on campus. This would provide university departments with a unique opportunity to observe how the same student interacts within the two separate contexts.

Future Research Directions

The present study raises new and interesting questions in light of previous studies on positioning within the classroom by expanding the analysis to critical out of the classroom interactions and observations (Anderson, 2009; De Costa, 2011; Kayi-Aydar, 2012). More classroom observations and insight from other classmates and instructors is necessary to draw any large conclusions.

Finally, on the campus of the present study, academic and administrative departments are asking similar questions regarding the university's international student population. These stakeholders are offering workshops and roundtables, conducting surveys and interviews, and developing international student leadership groups to investigate the needs, goals, and challenges for campus internationalization and successful international student transition on both the academic and social front. We recommend that this collaboration stretches beyond the borders of universities in order to establish a unified network would allow us to pool resources, share research questions and findings, and inform a wider audience.

Conclusion

This case study has tracked Freddy's reflexive and interactive positioning throughout his first year at an American university and stands alone as a unique case in which an international student's resourcefulness, hard work, self-awareness positioned him to work toward an ideal future self and community. As Freddy's case study demonstrates, international students offer a diverse set of linguistic, cultural, and personal resources that can be identified and shared. What remains to be seen is what the American academic community can learn from these experiences in order to provide international students with an optimal educational experience abroad.

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