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Persistent Invisibilities: Discourses, Identities, and Investment in English as a Foreign Language among Yi Minority College Students in Contemporary China

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ABSTRACT

Research in applied linguistics and language education has well documented that ethnic minority students often face challenges and underperform in mainstream English classrooms due to their limited linguistic capital and proficiency. However, the connections between these students' English learning experiences and the social contexts that shape their multiple identity constructions have been largely underexplored. This ethnographic case study examines how seven Yi Chinese minority students invest in learning English as a foreign language and construct multiple identities within various Discourses at a large university in China. Utilizing Discourse, investment, and identity theory, as well as thematic analysis of interviews, diaries, and fieldnotes, the

study found that: (1) minority students constructed both negative and positive identities across time and space, influenced primarily by Discourse of ethnic differentiation, exam orientation, and blended learning; (2) they selectively invested in English lexical knowledge, listening skills, and spoken English, focusing on areas believed to bring them most benefits in their future lives; and (3) their English learning in college was shaped by their perceptions of the language, their future aspirations, and their socio-cultural dynamics. The study highlights the critical need for language educators to recognize the multiple identities, agency, and diverse learning needs of minority learners.

Keywords: foreign language learning, ethnic minority learners, identities, discourses, investment

Introduction

China has been home to 55 minority groups alongside the dominant Han (ethnic Chinese) since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Most minority students live in remote areas where economic conditions limit their access to compulsory education resources. Undeniably, education in most minority regions lags far behind the coastal regions (e.g., Shanghai, Guangzhou), and English as a subject fares worse than other school subjects (Yang, 2005). English is a mandatory subject for students from Year 3 of primary school to the final year of high school (Year 12), meaning that each Han student typically receives at least 10 years of instruction before entering universities. In contrast, many ethnic minority students start learning English at a later age (after 7), compared to Han students, who can either access English classes at private language institutes or attend classes offered at schools at an earlier age (before 6 or even at kindergarten). In some minority regions, English is simply nonexistent at elementary school, further contributing to the generally lower English proficiency of ethnic minority students relative to their Han counterparts.

Put differently, ethnic minority students are less likely to achieve the same or similar English proficiency as their Han peers, both in primary school and tertiary education (Tollefson & Tsui, 2014). After entering universities, many minority students often sense a significant English language proficiency gap between themselves and their Han peers (Zhang, 2019). With lower English proficiency, keeping pace with the main group—Han students—in the English classroom entails considerable effort. Despite decades since the seminal studies on minority language learners, this issue persists in various countries, including China, over the last 10 years (Crowther,

2019; Guo, 2016; Li et al., 2020; Nguyen & Hamid, 2017). However, these challenges remain largely invisible to many mainstream Chinese, who often assume that minority students are no different from the majority Han.

Given English's gatekeeping function in social mobility and employment opportunities, along with its global spread driven by social, political, and socioeconomic changes (Jiang et al., 2020), exploring the English language learning experiences of Chinese ethnic minority learners could deepen our understanding of their complex aspirations, multiple identities, and challenges in acquiring a foreign language. This study, therefore, aims to explore the sociocultural context in which Chinese ethnic minority students (specifically the Yi group) are situated and how they invest in learning English to enhance their proficiency within a multiethnic educational environment.

Literature Review

In the last two decades, many studies have investigated different language learners' learning experiences in various contexts, such as in Canada (Morita, 2004), the U.S. (Crowther, 2019; Lee, 2014; McKay & Wong, 1996; Shi & Guo, 2020; Steinbach, 2014), Brazil (Carazzai, 2013), Korea (Vasilopoulos, 2015), China (Zhang, 2018), and Pakistan (Manan & Hajar, 2022). It is unanimously acknowledged that second language (SL) or foreign language (FL) learners' identity is greatly impacted by their language learning experiences in their local communities, and results have shown that there is a complex interplay between the language learning process and various factors in which social roles, relationships, and identities are constantly constituted and reconstituted.

Despite the growing research on language learners who learn English as a second language in English-speaking countries, less research has focused on minority students who learn English as a foreign language in their local or non-target language learning contexts. The existing studies on minorities show that these learners often face challenges and underperform in mainstream English classrooms due to their limited linguistic capital and proficiency (Adamson & Xia, 2011; Jiang et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020; Yang, 2005), and thus they encounter more complex situations and identity issues in the course of their language learning than their mainstreaming counterparts (Lee & Ahn, 2016; Li et al., 2020). Likewise, in China, the literature currently available discusses the increasingly important role of English for mainstream Chinese students while frequently leaving out how the English language is learned, used, and perceived by more than 100 million Chinese ethnic minorities (Yang, 2005). To date, only a small number have investigated ethnic minority students' English learning in the Chinese context, including

those conducted in mainland China (Cui & De Costa, 2024; Guo, 2016; Guo & Gu, 2024; Zhang, 2018), specifically targeting Uygur students. These studies illuminate the relationship between learners' investment and diverse identities (e.g., imagined identity), which is socially and historically mediated, and are concerned with the unique role of the English language in the Chinese context. Nevertheless, it is also essential to consider their FL environments to better grasp how their learning investment and complex identities function in such environments.

As attested by previous research, minority learners' English learning process is not isolated but connected with the outside world, be they classrooms, social communities, or workplaces. Therefore, ethnic minority students are shaped by their learning environments (i.e., Discourse) in viewing and expressing themselves during English language learning. For instance, they may become aware of the pragmatic value of English, believing that a good command of English enables them to express themselves internationally, avoid marginalization from the dominant Han students, and network with different groups around them (Nguyen & Hamid, 2017). Based on this view, moving from their hometown to the new tertiary institution in the metropolis, for ethnic minority students, English learning can impact their identity construction and vice versa, including new language identity and cultural identities, which in turn influence how they want to invest in English language learning with various aims.

However, there is very little research investigating the learner identity dynamics, investment, and discourses simultaneously in relation to EFL learning in the Chinese context (Guo, 2016; Guo & Gu, 2024; Zhang, 2018). Guo's (2016) doctoral project employed a qualitative, ethnographic-oriented research methodology to explore how multilingual exposure shapes Uyghur students' identity construction and transformation in a key university in Shanghai. In more recent research, Cui and De Costa (2024) focused on two Uyghur female students, examining how they constructed and negotiated identities through investment in Chinese and English at a multiethnic university in a developed city in China. Unlike the studies reviewed above, which were conducted in broader university contexts, Zhang's (2018) study specifically examined how systemic functional linguistics (SFL)-based teaching in the English writing classroom could empower Chinese ethnic minority students in English learning.

Based on the above discussion, it is crucial to understand ethnic minority students' learning contexts and their perceptions of and investment in English language learning. Focusing on minorities' investment in improving their English proficiency, this study attempts to explore the Discourses (learning environments) and the role of FL learning in mediating learners' identities in a multiethnic context, which has been underexplored in

the field of identity and FL learning research. The research aims to answer the following questions:

(1) What are the Discourses surrounding Yi students in relation to their English language learning in a tertiary setting?

(2) Within those diverse Discourses, what identities do Yi students construct through their investment in English learning in a multiethnic setting?

Theoretical Framework: Discourse, Identity, Investment, and Language Learning

Language learning, as a social practice, involves the identities of learners and their situating contexts (Norton, 2001), such as classrooms, social communities, or workplaces. Thus, language learners are shaped by their learning environments (i.e., Discourse), which influence how they express themselves during their English language learning experiences. Following Gee (2015), Discourse is understood as:

> socially accepted associations among ways of using language and other symbolic expressions, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting, as well as using various tools, technologies, or props that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network' to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful 'role' or to signal that one is fulfilling a social niche in a distinctively recognizable fashion. (Gee, 2015, p. 161)

Whether monologic or dialogic, verbal or nonverbal, instructional or non-instructional, L2 learning undeniably occurs in varied Discourses (Boxer & Zhu, 2017). Within diverse Discourses, learners construct various identities throughout their English learning journeys. Language learners' identity refers to "how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the people understand the possibilities for the future" (Norton, 1997, p. 410). Identity is a complex social practice through which relations are defined, negotiated, and resisted (Norton & McKinney, 2011). Additionally, learning is more than the accumulation of knowledge and skills; it is "a process of becoming, or avoid becoming a certain person," entailing how L2 learners construct and reconstruct their multiple and shifting identities through learning and using a foreign language (Gao, 2011, p. 288). Scholars in identity and language acquisition aim to uncover how language learners understand such relationships to the world and how these relationships evolve over time and

space (Guo, 2021; McKay & Wong, 1996; Peirce, 1995; Vasilopoulos, 2015; Xu et al., 2023).

The notion of investment has been used to highlight the relationship between learners and the target language as socially and historically constructed (Peirce, 1995). Investment refers to learners' commitment to learning a language, connecting to their belief that such efforts will enable them to "acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital and social power" (Peirce, 1995, p. 17). Different types of capital signal different values. These can be broadly classified into four types: (1) cultural capital (e.g., knowledge, skills, academic qualifications, and cultural goods), (2) economic capital (i.e., material resources directly translatable into money), (3) social capital (e.g., social relations), and (4) symbolic capital, which encompasses the first three (Peirce, 1995).

This study views language as both a linguistic and cultural capital, enhancing an individual's social standing and access to resources. Firstly, English proficiency is considered a form of linguistic capital, providing learners with the ability to communicate effectively in a global lingua franca and access a vast wealth of information, such as academic research, global news, and technical resources. This proficiency opens up opportunities for education, employment, and social mobility that might otherwise be inaccessible. Secondly, English offers access to a wide range of cultural goods, including literature, films, and music—key components of global cultural capital. Engaging with these cultural products enables learners to participate in global cultural conversations and appreciate the cultural output of English-speaking societies. Moreover, cultural capital includes academic qualifications and professional credentials, making learners more competitive in the global job market.

In summary, viewing English as both linguistic and cultural capital underscores its multifaceted value in enhancing an individual's social and symbolic capital. This perspective explains how investment in English learning can yield significant gains in various forms of capital, ultimately contributing to increased social power and cultural enrichment.

Methodology

Participants on a Multiethnic Campus

The ethnographic case study was conducted at a public municipal university, thereafter referred to as Tianfu University (TU), located in Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan Province, China. At TU, ethnic minority students constitute approximately 9% of the total student population (around

21,900 students), with approximately 2,000 belonging to various minority groups (University Report, 2023). Among these, Yi minority students represent the largest ethnic group in Sichuan Province. Prior to joining TU, most Yi students lived in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture (e.g., Xichang or other counties), a region that contrasts sharply with Chengdu in terms of demographic features, socioeconomic development, and cultural ethos.

For this study, seven Yi students were recruited based on the following criteria: (1) they were born and raised in the Yi Autonomous Prefecture and attended either primary school or high school there, (2) they are multilingual learners, proficient in the Yi dialect, Mandarin Chinese, and English; (3) they regularly migrate between their hometowns and the university, maintaining communication with their families and local communities during holidays; (4) they are motivated to improve their English proficiency, regardless of their current level of competence.

These participants varied widely in terms of gender, learning experiences, and home language. Some attended bilingual high school classes where both Mandarin and Yi were used as languages of instruction, while most had limited exposure to English education in school. For a detailed summary of the participants' demographic data, see Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Yi Participants

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Pre-university Educational context	NCEE English score	Beginning exposure of English language	Reported home Language
Jim	M	County	119	Junior high	Yi language
Su	M	County	116	Junior high	Yi language
Alex	M	Xichang city	126	Elementary school	Sichuan dialect
Laura	F	County	88	Junior high	Yi language
Fiona	F	County	124	Elementary school	Sichuan dialect
Joy	F	Ya'an city	110	Elementary school	Sichuan dialect
Christina	F	County	90	Junior high	Yi language

Data Collection and Analysis

To gather essential data about the participants, I collaborated with their English teacher, Ms. Jasmine, who primarily taught Integrated English courses to non-English majors using the communicative language teaching method (CLT) method. Regular interviews with Ms. Jasmine, focusing on the academic performance of ethnic students and her teaching practices, were incorporated into the findings.

Data collection spanned ten months and involved multiple sources, including: individual interviews, participants' diaries, group interviews (i.e., diary discussion), fieldnotes, and documents. The individual interviews explored topics such as the participants' English learning experiences, social life on campus, academic goals, and perceptions of their experiences at TU and in the EFL classroom (see the interview guide in the Appendix). To ensure participants could express their thoughts freely, they were given the option to speak in either Chinese or English.

For data analysis, NVivo12 was employed to code and categorize the data. This ensured a systematic approach aligned with the study's conceptual framework, facilitating the identification of meaningful themes.

The analysis began with open coding, where I documented initial interpretations while reviewing interview transcripts and official documents. Numerous codes were developed, particularly around Discourse shaping the participants' investment in English proficiency. For instance, an exam-oriented Discourse was identified through a combination of the words from the national policies and news articles published on the university's website.

Findings

As Yi students transition between Yi Autonomous Prefecture and Chengdu, they encountered multiple Discourses, three of which emerged as the most prominent: *ethnic differentiation Discourse*, *exam-oriented Discourse*, and *blended learning Discourse*. Within these Discourses, the students constructed multiple identities at TU and selectively invested in English learning with different objectives.

Ethnic Differentiation Discourse: "I can sense the gap between me and others"

The *ethnic differentiation Discourse* reflects a perceived superiority of the dominant Han toward those from autonomous regions, which are often economically underdeveloped and have lower literacy rates. In Chinese educational settings, ethnic differentiation Discourse manifests through

negative remarks and actions that highlight the need for additional support for minority students, implying deficits in their general behavior and learning abilities. For Yi minority students, their ethnic status and limited English proficiency are often viewed as shortcomings requiring immediate intervention from the university.

At TU, the ethnic differentiation Discourse was evident in various forms. In their Integrate English Course, Yi students often sat in the back or sat along the side walls of the classroom, reflecting a tendency to maintain a low profile, symbolizing a quiet learner identity. Moreover, their English teacher, Ms. Jasmine, frequently positioned them as deficient learners. Interview data highlighted Ms. Jasmine's views of several students:

Jim was described as having inadequate English language proficiency, saying that "I have to mix with much Chinese during my teaching, otherwise, you know, Jim can hardly understand anything in my class" (1st interview with Ms. Jasmine, 14th, July, 2022).

Alex was seen as idle, often failing to prepare for lessons or bring his textbook to class.

Laura was described as highly "sensitive"; her presentation performance significantly depended on her classmates' responses. If her peers remained silent, her performance deteriorated.

Joy was characterized as too shy to volunteer answers during class discussions.

The *ethnic differentiation Discourse* had a profound impact on participants' self-positioning and their investment in learning English. Many participants acknowledged their limited command of English and sensed the distinct "gap" between themselves and Han peers in terms of their English proficiency, as shown in the following individual interview:

> I can sense the gap between me and others in terms of English language proficiency. I even cannot open my month in occasions when I need to express myself in English and my grammar is also very poor. Others have a good command of English language. (Laura, individual interview, March, 1st, 2022)

> I feel a lot of pressure in my English learning because I think my classmates are very talented. I see a **gap** between me and them in English proficiency. (Christina, diary discussion, Feb, 20th, 2022)

The interview excerpts above reveal how participants positioned themselves as less competent English learners at TU. The word "gap" emerged repeatedly during discussions of their English learning experiences.

Participants often contrasted themselves with their Han peers, referring to "Han students," "they," and "others" as more talented and proficient in English, while describing "I" and "me" as struggling and under pressure within this learning community.

In discussions about spoken English, Yi students frequently used the word "different" to express the distance between themselves and Han students, particularly in terms of oral content and pronunciation. The following excerpts illustrate this perception:

> In English class, when I hear my classmates speak, I feel that my oral English is not as good as theirs. What's more, their spoken content and depth differ from what I think. I feel that my thinking is quite shallow. (Joy, diary discussion, Feb, 20th, 2022)

> I often feel that I have an accent and my pronunciation is not standard when speaking English, being different from how my classmates and teacher express themselves. There seems to be a significant gap on speaking competence between me and others. Sometimes it seems like they don't understand what I'm saying. (Laura, diary discussion, Feb. 17th, 2022)

The excerpts reveal that the learning distance between Yi and Han students was even more conspicuous in their accents. Participants acknowledged having a strong accent and even hesitated to speak English because they worried that they may not be understood by their classmates and teacher. As a result, they constructed an identity as poor English users and speakers due to a lack of linguistic capital. Even outside the instructional context, this self-positioning was dominant and reinforced Yi students' desire to improve their spoken English, as shown in the following:

> I want to be able to converse in English casually. In our dorm, there's a guy who really enjoys speaking English. I often find myself completely lost when listening to him. Every time he speaks English to me, I don't understand. He teases me about it ... while I can only stay silent in response. (Jim, diary discussion, Feb, 20th, 2022)

The sharp discrepancy between Jim's and his roommate's English proficiency pushed him into the position of a poor English user and a helpless responder, prompting him to reshape his learning objectives: "be able to converse in English casually." These self-positions, in turn, shaped

participants' investment in spoken English. For example, Yi students engaged seriously in the online spoken English assignments. Every other week, Ms. Jasmine assigned one online oral task that required students to respond orally to a given topic. Before the class, students uploaded their individual recordings to the online platform after recording their spoken responses. During the class, Ms. Jasmine reviewed and openly provided selective feedback on students' submitted recordings. For Yi students, this was not an easy task:

> I find this spoken assignment still challenging. Even though the teacher [Ms. Jasmine] provided topics, there are times that I don't know what to say. When I do have something to say, I often need to rehearse repeatedly before I dare to upload my spoken audio. (Jim, diary discussion, Nov, 5th, 2022)

As shown above, despite their strong desire to improve their spoken English, Yi students struggled with the oral writing assignment. Challenging as it was, Yi students invested in this spoken task by rehearsing repeatedly because "[a]t the very least, it allows us to speak more English, increasing our familiarity with the language" (Alex, diary discussion Nov, 5th, 2022).

Exam-Oriented Discourse: "I think I will never overcome it"

The exam-oriented Discourse is dominant at TU. The university requires students to take major-related and foreign language tests. This Discourse reflects the institution's stern attitude toward examinations, including the national-level language test, CET4, and CET6. TU takes CET4/6 seriously, as evinced by the school launching free lectures for undergraduates and organizing mock tests for all the students before the test day. Essentially, the exam-oriented Discourse marginalized Yi students in the English language classroom at TU because of the discrepancies in English linguistic ability and the unequal chance of passing the test for Yi students. Failing the test can be distressing for the participants, as reflected in Laura's diary below:

> This week, the most painful thing is receiving the result of CET4. Today is the day that Educational Bureau released the CET4 score. I was so sad that I failed this test, although I knew I was likely to fail it. (Laura, diary, Feb, 26th, 2022)

In her diary, Laura described the CET4 exam as "a painful thing" because, deep down, she knew she would not pass. In spite of this "self-

awareness," she felt disappointed when she saw the exam result—FAIL, which led her to adopt a "failed test taker" identity. Besides feeling distress, participants also lacked confidence when facing these high-stakes exams, which was aggravated by their perceptions of a weak language foundation and major difficulties they encountered:

> CET4 was so hard for me! I think I can never overcome it! (Laura, diary, Feb, 17th, 2022)

This statement shows that Laura positioned herself as a struggling learner. This identity indicates her view of the exam as a formidable challenge she felt unable to overcome. Such sentiments about passing CET4 are understandable, given Yi students' prior experiences with English language learning. Despite its challenging nature, Yi students were well aware of the difficulties associated with the exams, as shown in the group interview below:

> In some exams, including CET4, the listening materials were really difficult to comprehend. For me, it is like listening to a totally unintelligible language (听天书 Tīng tiānshū). I really want to improve my listening competence. (Laura, diary discussion, Feb, 20th, 2022)

> Listening is a challenge for me. This may be due to my insufficient vocabulary. When listening to recordings, I can only understand a few words within a sentence. (Joy, group interview on November, 5th, 2022)

As shown, Laura's reflection on her difficulties with listening comprehension in CET4 indicates a clear commitment to enhancing her language skills. The excerpts above reveal that, for Yi students, a lack of vocabulary and limited listening ability hindered their comprehension of test materials. Recognizing these difficulties enhanced their desire to improve specific areas of English learning with the aim of passing exams. For example, to catch up with Han peers, many minority students bought vocabulary books or pamphlets that contained high-frequency words falling into CET. Some of them attempted to memorize the new words by completing reading tasks—looking up words in the dictionary after completing the reading exercise and then keeping them in mind. In the process of accumulating new vocabulary, Yi students actively utilized various resources (e.g., test materials, vocabulary pamphlets, vocabulary applications on the phone). Notably, many of them had been good at memorizing new words since high school and regarded it as "the easiest thing" in learning English.

Participants also viewed the listening proficiency as important, as it facilitates passing exams and functions as a primary way to familiarize oneself with the English language (Su, diary discussion, Feb, 20th, 2022). However, their strategy for improving listening competence seems to be limited to doing practice tests, as Fiona shared:

> I have done many practice questions. I bought a set of CET-4 practice tests and do at least one every week. However, I always feel like I make a lot of mistakes, especially in the listening section, where it's really hard to see much improvement. (Fiona, March, 26th, 2022, diary discussion).

It is worth noting that Yi students' desire to pass CET4 stemmed from their perception of the CET credential as a symbolic capital, which they could draw on to empower themselves in their future lives, providing psychological comfort and serving as a stepping stone in the job market, as they expressed in interviews:

> I want something which can comfort me that I did not waste so many years in learning English. CET4 credential is such a thing. It may also be helpful for my future work, as I may encounter many English documents if I work as an auditor. (Jim, individual interview on March 1st, 2022)

As presented above, Jim saw the CET4 credential as tangible proof of one's English proficiency, validating the time and effort he invested in learning English. This credential is important to him, as it serves as both a milestone in his academic journey and also a stepping stone in his professional career. The imagined identity of being a professional auditor enhanced his desire for better English proficiency.

Blended Learning Discourse: "I feel a sense of achievement"

TU operates within the Discourse of blended learning. Since 2019, TU has reformed its Integrated English course to embrace a blended teaching mode, combining 9 weeks of face-to-face instruction with 3 weeks of online study. This reform aligns with the internationalization of higher education and aims to expand the capacity for digital content delivery while fostering autonomous learning among students. Blended learning at TU is not merely an integration of online and offline education; it represents a pedagogical approach that enhances competencies in communication, interaction, collaboration, and the construction of new knowledge. This shift reflects a

commitment to adapting educational practices to meet evolving global standards and to better prepare students for a dynamic learning environment.

To effectively implement the new curriculum, both English teachers and students must engage in well-organized strategies and activities suitable for both physical and digital environments. The Integrated English Course at TU is designed to broaden students' perspectives, cultivate their moral values through the study of diverse genres, and enhance their language application skills. Consequently, in online learning, students are typically required to engage in self-learning tasks to prepare for the upcoming classroom lessons. These tasks may include previewing new lessons, completing related exercises, analyzing text structures, summarizing main ideas, and preparing for group work. Once in the physical classroom, students participate in various activities such as reading articles, role-playing, giving individual presentations, and engaging in teacher feedback on assignments.

By navigating through blended learning Discourses, Yi minority students reconstructed their identities as competent English learners and autonomous learners. As discussed in the previous sections, participants faced a variety of difficulties in English learning at TU while simultaneously realizing that being college students meant learning to learn independently. With a weak English foundation, they felt they needed to strive harder and invest more in their learning. In fact, my participants gained a sense of achievement and thus constructed positive identities in blended learning, as shown below:

> Time flies, and in the blink of an eye, another two weeks of classes have passed. I think my familiarity with English has returned. I've mastered more vocabulary and invested more time in memorizing words, which has made understanding the text much easier. During online lesson, I make time to complete the exercises, which I've never done before. Surprisingly, I have a sense of achievement after finishing them. (Su, diary on March 26th,2022)

The above diary excerpt reflects Su's positive identity shift from a deficient English learner to a diligent, autonomous student with growth in learning ability and self-confidence. This evolving learner identity was constructed through his daily investment in English learning, including memorizing new words and proactively completing exercises. This suggests that Su was willing to be socialized into this academic Discourse of blended learning, which aligned with TU's motto: "Self-love, Self-discipline, Self-respect, Self-improvement." In addition to completing the course requirements, Yi students also voluntarily invested in English learning in areas that interested them, with more ease:

> I enjoy imitating lines from movies that interest me or have left a deep impression on me after watching them. Through this subconscious imitation, you'll gradually find that speaking English isn't as tough as it may seem. For me, speaking English is not that difficult. (Alex, diary discussion, Feb, 27th, 2022)

As seen above, within blended learning Discourse, some Yi students engaged in English learning activities outside the physical instructional site in a more relaxed and enjoyable way. Also, Alex enacted a competent English speaker identity, challenging the stereotypical impression of minority students as deficient English learners. Participants were allowed access to diverse resources at their own pace, including language learning applications and English content on the internet (e.g., TV shows, or TikTok videos). Yi participants described their learning routine when having online lessons in their diaries:

> I love to watch the short English videos on TikTok, WeChat channels and watch English movies. If I didn't understand what they said, I would translate them with the help of dictionary and take notes. (Christina, dairy, April, 15th, 2022)

> I love to watch TED speeches, as those speeches can broaden my horizon and thinking, and also beneficial for my speaking. (Joy, dairy, Feb, 20th, 2022).

As shown, Yi students found learning methods that suited them and enjoyed their investment in English. By appropriating a variety of resources and adopting different methods, Yi participants were exposed to interactive exercises and real-life scenarios. Notably, mediated by blended learning Discourse, some participants were able to reshape their English learning objectives, adopting new views on the value of the English language:

> I learn English not with an aim to pass the CET4. It is not that I do not want to get the CET4 certificate but because my English proficiency cannot qualify me to pass it at the moment. Therefore, I learn English for other purposes, as I may use it in my future life. (Christina, diary discussion, Feb, 20th, 2022)

Christina's statement reveals a shift from focusing solely on obtaining the CET certificate to a broader vision for learning English. This shift

suggests a change in her views, valuing English not just as a credential but as a tool for communication and personal development. This change may have been enabled by the blended learning approach, which provided her with more flexibility, resources, and opportunities to view English as a valuable skill for everyday use rather than just an academic requirement. This is also the case with Alex, who invested in improving his spoken English through playing a computer game that offered him a channel to communicate with the outside world:

> I love a computer game named VR Chatting. It is primarily a virtual real game in the form of social chatting. Gamers from all over the world were chatting in the game in their free time. I have made a number of foreign friends on it and we mainly communicate in English…, I learned a lot by playing this game, such as greeting in Hindi and some Filipino English. (Alex, diary on April, 17th, 2022)

As shown above, Alex legitimated himself as a cosmopolitan in this virtual community, where people from all over the world engaged in this social chatting. For Yi participants, the opportunity to use English in a real context allowed them to enact a global citizen identity in the game world. This imagined identity connects to the reality that they can practice their English language skills, which brings them language capital that is valued by institutions and the job market.

Table 2

Summary of Yi Students' Identity Dynamics and Investment in Multiple Discourses

Multiple Discourses	Dynamic identities	Selective investment
Ethnic differentiation Discourse	Ethnic minority Yi; deficient English learners; quiet learners; learners of heavy accent; poor language users and speakers; helpless responders;	Spoken English
Exam-oriented Discourse	Failed test takers; Struggling learners	Lexical knowledge; listening proficiency
Blended learning Discourse	Competent learners; autonomous learners; achievers; cosmopolitans	Lexical knowledge; spoken English; English varieties

Discussion

The study examined the educational context of Yi minority students and their English language learning as they moved from an ethnic autonomous prefecture to a municipal university in pursuit of higher education in China. Findings revealed three dominant Discourses surrounding Yi participants' mainstream education context at TU: Discourse of ethnic differentiation, exam orientation, and blended learning. While Yi minorities were negatively influenced by the former two Discourses, they benefitted from the blended learning Discourse. At TU, ethnic minority students were viewed as "less competent" and problematic, which reinforced stereotypes about their English abilities and led to their feelings of inferiority. They also faced increased pressure to perform well in English exams, which caused anxiety and reduced confidence, especially when they felt the "gap" between them and their majority Han peers. The blended learning Discourse, however, provided Yi students with greater freedom, access to wider resources, and more opportunities to engage in English learning, giving them a broader view of the English language. This multiplicity of Discourses is similar to what has been observed in the U.S. educational context, where racialized Discourses, model-minority Discourse, and school Discourses shaped the English language learning of Chinese immigrant students (McKay & Wong, 1996). However, unlike previous indigenous studies (e.g., Guo, 2016), which primarily focused on analyzing social Discourses, the findings of this study highlighted Discourses across multiple contexts (e.g., classroom, institution). These findings revealed that the interplay of these various Discourses collectively influenced Yi students' positionings, their English instructors' perceptions of minorities, and how they invested in English language learning.

Surrounded by multiple Discourses, Yi students constructed and reconstructed various identities, both negative and positive ones (Lee, 2014; Morita, 2004; Peirce, 1995; Steinbach, 2014). Yi minority students were negatively other- and self-positioned within the Discourse of ethnic differentiation and exam orientation. However, they were able to reconstruct positive identities by navigating the blended learning Discourse, which enabled them to access more opportunities to engage with the outside world and adopt a more self-directed and purposeful approach to learning. Specifically, the collective ethnic labeling as "minority Yi" and "deficient English learners," combined with their negative self-perception, marginalized Yi students economically and educationally in comparison to Han students, who possessed more linguistic and symbolic capital valued by institutions and the job market. This confirmed what Darvin and Norton (2021) claimed: that

capital is power, indicating the "differences" and "inequality" between learners. As Yi students adapted to the blended teaching mode, they gained access to more resources and strategies, making English learning easier and more enjoyable. In this process, they reconstructed their identities as competent and autonomous learners, which gave them a sense of achievement. This identity reconstruction could be seen as a manifestation of personal agency. These findings echoed those of Zhang (2018), who found that Ughur students could transition from the constraints of their educational background and self-perceived deficit identity to becoming emerging academic writers with systemic functional linguistics-based teaching.

Further, situated in the mainstream education context, Yi students selectively invested in English learning, either enabled by learner agency or shaped by the various Discourses. Within the Discourse of ethnic differentiation and exam orientation, minorities' investment in learning English was constrained and limited, viewing English primarily as a cultural capital that could provide credentials. However, as they engaged further with the blended learning mode, Yi students recognized the pragmatic value and symbolic significance of English as a foreign language, a form of capital that can provide "RESOURCES that constitute our position in social world" (Darvin & Norton, 2021, p. 8). Yi students selectively invested in the language knowledge and skills they valued most—lexical knowledge, listening skills, and spoken competence. This aligned with previous studies on minority students' learning in Western contexts (e.g., Chang, 2016; McKay & Wong, 1996), which showed that learners' investment in language learning is highly selective. However, these findings contrast with those of Cui and De Costa (2024), whose Ughur participants found that Chinese, rather than English, is a more powerful linguistic capital that can be transformed into economic capital if they work in their hometown, Xinjiang. This decreased their investment in English learning despite their interest in it.

Consistent with Norton's assertion regarding the intrinsic link between investment and identity, the analysis suggests that minority students' investment goes beyond mere instrumental motivation because they have complex identities and multiple desires (Peirce, 1995). Yi participants desired to eliminate their accents when speaking English and not be "different" from their Han peers, aligning with Darvin and Norton's (2016) assertion:

> At the center of language learning is desire for a target language, the identities represented by particular accents and varieties, and the recognition, security and symbolic ties that are associated with the learning of this language. (p. 26)

One could argue, therefore, that learners' investment in English learning is motivated by both tangible benefits (e.g., good grades, language credentials) and by the desire to realize their desired identities (e.g., competent English learner) in immediate and imagined communities (Darvin & Norton, 2021, p. 8). It is significant to relate learners to the social world rather than merely focusing on learners' feelings and thinking (i.e., their inner world). To have more powerful subjectivities from which to speak, learners can reframe their relationship to others in academic and non-academic communities through investment in language practices.

Implications and Conclusion

Focusing on Yi group students' investment in learning English, this qualitative research is limited to participants in one particular university and involves only a small number of participants. Thus, it is difficult to generalize the findings to other contexts, such as Yi students in key universities or those educated in coastal colleges. In spite of this, efforts were made to ensure diversity among participants in terms of gender, family background, home language, and other relevant factors.

This study demonstrates that Yi students' identity construction during English language learning is shaped by three salient Discourses at TU, which collectively influence their investment in learning the language. These insights carry significant research and pedagogical implications. For research implications, the present study underscores the importance of situating individual learners within their lived contexts and examining their English learning experiences across time and space. Rather than categorizing participants into fixed ethnic groups, it suggests viewing learners as complex, multidimensional individuals with multifaceted identities connected to the broader social world. Furthermore, it advocates for considering the impacts of prominent Discourses in their situated contexts to better investigate the vital influence of social contexts on minority learners' motivation in foreign language learning.

The findings also have pedagogical implications, especially regarding the provision of English language support for ethnic minorities in multiethnic universities. First, minority students should not be essentialized as "poor" or "deficient" English learners. Despite their relatively weak English foundations, university teachers should empower ethnic minority learners by recognizing their diverse learning needs and aspirations. They should provide resources to help these learners reposition themselves as capable English users in the classroom. Also, universities can offer tailored language support,

such as remedial courses and self-study programs, to enhance their continued investments in English learning.

Furthermore, independent learning should be promoted, as its positive effects were validated in this study, where Yi students effectively constructed positive identities and achieved a sense of accomplishment through blended learning. Finally, since this study reveals that learners are individuals with diverse identities and unequal access to resources, it is necessary for teachers "to reflect critically on their own worldviews and the extent to which they recognize the unequal lived realities of learners" (Darvin & Norton, 2021, p. 9). By doing so, teachers can create a learning environment that encourages learners' investment in language learning.

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Appendix

Interview guide

1) Could you please share your Yi language/Chinese/ English language learning experiences?
2) What do you think are the most important languages to you? Why?
3) How do you think of the importance of learning English?
4) Has your English competence posed any challenges to your academic or social life? If so, could you please elaborate?
5) Do you find it easy or difficult to adapt to the language (e.g., Chinese and English) environment at TU?
6) Could you please share your recent English language learning experiences or stories?
7) Compared with Han counterparts, what are your advantages and disadvantages related to language and language learning (English and Chinese)?
8) Could you please share your vision of your life after graduation?
9) How do you think of the importance of English in relation to your future?