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## EXPLORING CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR EXPERIENCE IN AN INTENSIVE ENGLISH PROGRAM AT A US MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY

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EXPLORING CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR  
EXPERIENCE IN AN INTENSIVE ENGLISH PROGRAM AT A US MIDWESTERN  
UNIVERSITY

by

Yishi Long

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Professor Miles T. Bryant

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2013

EXPLORING CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR  
EXPERIENCE IN AN INTENSIVE ENGLISH PROGRAM AT A US MIDWESTERN  
UNIVERSITY

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University of Nebraska, 2013

Advisor: Miles T. Bryant

This phenomenological study described Chinese students' learning experiences in an Intensive English Program at a U.S. public university. Its main purpose was to investigate whether Chinese students think this program help them transition to American academic and social environment more smoothly.

The researcher adopted purposive sampling because there were selection criteria: (a) Chinese Intensive English students, (b) not in the Partnership Degree Programs, (c) 19 years of age or older, and (d) enrolled in 2013 spring academic semester at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The sample was 10 students, five males and five females, from Basic Level to Advanced Level.

The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews to gather data. Interview questions consisted of open ended, multiple and probing questions. Few closed questions were used. The data were analyzed and organized into themes. Demographic data and findings were showed in tables and figures.

Findings revealed that the majority of the participants were satisfied with the program because they observed their great progress with listening and speaking after they took classes, however, the level they satisfaction depended on how long they had to study in the program.

The students reported lower level of satisfaction when they studied longer in the program.

One major recommendation of the study was that language instruction should be more integrated with academic course content in the Intensive English Program. This qualitative study also recommended topics for future research based on the ideas the researcher gathered from the interviews.

## **Dedication**

For my parents and brother, I love you more than anything. Thanks a lot for giving me the chance to study in America. I would not be where I am today without your never-ending support, constant love and encouragement. I am very blessed to have such a fantastic family.

For my professors, thank you for your guidance, support and patience in the past two years.

For my friends, thank you for your being there whenever I need you.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Background**

Today, an increasing number of international students pursue higher education in America. In 2011/2012, 764,495 international students came to study in the U.S., and of these, 309,342 were at the undergraduate level, 300,430 were at the graduate level, and 69,566 were at the non-degree level (Open Doors “fast facts”, 2012). This report also notes that the top five sending countries are China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia and Canada.

There are several benefits of having international students on campus. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, international students contribute over \$22.7 billion to the U.S. economy through their expenditures on tuition and living expenses (Open Doors Data, 2012). Apart from the obvious financial benefits for receiving institutions and the U.S. economy, students from countries outside of the United States diversify student populations, add new perspectives to campus conversations, and increase awareness for other countries and cultures (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Although the transition to institutions in higher education is a challenging process for many native American students, navigating this experience often presents even more difficulties for international students. International students deal with a whole host of issues in their new environment such as achieving financial stability, learning to adapt to a new culture, establishing a network of support, and efficiently mastering language/cultural difference (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002). There are a number of specific

characteristics being used to describe international students in the United States. They are viewed as handicapped, deficient (Mestenhauser, 1983, as cited in Hanassab, 2006), or bewildered (Pedersen, 1991, as cited in Hanassab, 2006) and lacking English-language ability and familiarity with the U.S. educational system (Paige, 1990, as cited in Hanassab, 2006).

Like many other colleges and universities in the U.S., the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) is seeking to expand. In 2011, the Chancellor proposed that the enrollment goal of the university be 30,000 students. International students are a targeted population to increase enrollment numbers. In order to be admitted into colleges and universities, international students must prove they have adequate English proficiency skills. Many institutions in America use the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) to evaluate students' language abilities. Although preparations are available in students' home countries, Chang (2011) stated that "many international students choose to prepare by attending an English as a Second Language (ESL) program in the United States prior to gaining admittance into an American undergraduate or graduate program" (p.21). By doing so, international students have the chance of improving their level of English while experiencing American life (p.21). Consistent with this trend, UNL offers international students the Intensive English Program to help ease the transition to a whole new institution.

The goal of the study was exploring the Chinese international students perceptions and attitudes in the Intensive English Program at UNL. The researcher offers several

suggestions and recommendations for future research. These proposals will not only help the administrators and instructors of this program create a better program for current international students, but will also assist American universities and colleges to attract and recruit more students for the program in order to gain further potential benefits. With these objectives in mind, the researcher conducted a qualitative study.

### **The University Intensive English Program (IEP)**

The Intensive English Program (IEP) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln is a non-degree, non-credit program that prepares international students to meet the language requirement of this university and other American universities. It organizes five regular sessions during the academic year. The IEP offers three levels of classes in the study, which are Basic, Intermediate and Advanced.

There are five language-learning areas in the IEP: (a) listening comprehension, (b) reading, (c) composition, (d) usage, and (e) pronunciation and American culture (Intensive English Program student handbook & directory, 2012, p.6). The duration of each regular session in the IEP is eight weeks, with 25 hours of classes every week from Monday to Friday. Each class lasts 50 minutes.

Additionally, the IEP conducts field trips, social activities, IEP Club and supplementary coursework for the students in order to help them practice English and learn about cultural and social life in America.

### **Definition of Special Terms**

For the purpose of this paper, several key terms were defined as follows.

- International Students: Students who study at American schools, colleges, or universities without U.S. citizenship or permanent U.S. residency.
- English Placement Examination (EPE): Students are required to take the English Placement Examination (EPE) to test their degree of language proficiency before starting classes in the program. This examination is used to place them in the appropriate levels of the IEP. Students with EPE scores of 59 or below will be put into the Basic level, students with EPE scores of 60 to 69 will study in the Intermediate level, students with scores of 70 to 76 will take classes in the Advanced level (Intensive English Program student handbook & directory, 2012, p.9). During the last week of each session, all IEP students take the EPE again to determine if they are ready to move on to a higher level or if they are ready to begin their academic studies at UNL. Students with EPE scores of 77 or higher may be eligible to enter the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (p.9).
- English as a Second Language (ESL): Teaching English to people who are living in an English-speaking country and whose first language is not English.
- Partnership Degree Programs: UNL's programs allow students at two Chinese universities to complete the first two years of their studies in China while taking English classes from UNL lecturers, and then, if academically successful, to apply for admission to UNL where they complete their degrees (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2013).



## Problem Statement

America is becoming an important studying destination for international students and there is an increasing number of students leaving their home countries to pursue education in the U.S. every year. The following table represents the increasing trend of international student population in the U.S. from 2005 to 2012.

Table 1: New International Student Enrollment, 2005/06 – 2011/12

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Undergraduate	61,342	63,749	68,195	82,136	79,365	84,543	90,903
Graduate	64,235	72,726	78,489	84,828	84,613	89,505	92,211
Non-Degree	17,346	20,703	26,437	33,496	38,992	40,442	45,353
<b>Total</b>	142,923	157,178	173,121	200,460	202,970	214,490	228,467

Source: Institute of International Education (2012).

Multiple researchers focus on developing services for undergraduate or graduate international students, however, there are not enough studies being done on improving the Intensive English Program's learning environment for international students. Students in this ESL program need attention.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the phenomenological study was to describe Chinese international students' learning experiences in the Intensive English Program and to explore how they think this program has helped them transition to American academic and social environment more smoothly.

The study had three specific goals. The first goal was to bring a better understanding of Chinese Intensive English students' language needs. The second goal was to evaluate the correlation between the program and Chinese international students' language improvement. The last goal was to gather suggestions to improve the program, such as curriculum development, at institutions in higher education in the America.

### **Research Questions**

The major question was: How do Chinese international students perceive their experiences in the Intensive English Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln? The main question contained other sub-questions that helped to better understand the phenomena. These sub-questions (RQ) were as follows:

RQ1: What language skills did Chinese students think were their most insufficient abilities?

RQ2: What language skills did Chinese students think were their most confident abilities?

RQ3: Do Chinese students believe IEP serve their language needs?

RQ4: Do Chinese students think IEP help them transition to American academic context more smoothly?

RQ5: Do Chinese students think IEP help them transition to American social context more smoothly?

### **Limitations of the Study**

- The researcher collected data only at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
- The number of participants was low, but it was a qualitative study.

- The participants were students; neither instructors nor administrators were included in the study.
- The results of the study were based on the 10 Chinese Intensive English students' self perceptions, which might not present the actual situations.
- The research was done within half a year (20 weeks). There was no repeating research to validate this study's results.

### **Significance of the Study**

The idea of increasing diversity in postsecondary institutions in America is not new. An internationally diverse student body brings valuable educational, cultural, and economic benefit to U.S. colleges and universities (Mamiseishvili, 2012). Because of their obvious values, institutions are increasing their emphasis on attracting and recruiting international students. As universities and colleges invest more resources to attract this student population, they need to simultaneously pay enough attention to international students' learning and living experiences because "after recruitment tactics bring these students to the United States, they may find themselves dissatisfied with their experience while enrolled" (Lee & Rice, 2007). Therefore institutions cannot just focus on getting international students on campus; they must make international students feel they care about them whether in academic, social or cultural aspects.

The unique aspect of the study is that it allowed students themselves to identify and evaluate both their most confident and insufficient language areas, and how these areas helped or impeded their experiences in academic and social contexts. The researcher wanted to give Chinese students a chance to describe their learning experiences in the

IEP, providing the program an opportunity to understand and assess the situation that Chinese students feel. Additionally, this study was the first to investigate Chinese international students' language needs in the Intensive English Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The results contributed to the literature on Chinese students' learning experiences in an ESL program at postsecondary institutions in America.

The researcher expected the study would produce practical and effective suggestions to IEP instructors and administrator as they continued to revise the program and in order to create a more productive learning environment for students. Besides students, the university was also expected to benefit from these suggestions to attract and recruit more international students in the Intensive English Program.

### **Overview of the Master Thesis**

By conducting this qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher states the background, purpose, significance, and research questions in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, the researcher reviews the previous references focused on international students. In Chapter 3, the researcher discusses the methodology used to collect data from the participants regarding their learning experiences in the IEP. In Chapter 4, the researcher presents the analysis of data obtained from participants and defined the themes of the findings. Finally, in Chapter 5, the researcher summarizes the findings, presents recommendations for the Intensive English Program and universities, and gives suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this review of literature chapter was to outline a framework to better understand the results and findings of this study, which are presented in Chapter 4 and discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

This literature review focuses on the common issues that plague international students on college and university campuses in America. Despite students' desire to study in the United States, the pursuit of a U.S. degree and improved vocational opportunities presents many challenges for international students (Crockett & Hays, 2011). In other words, they face different challenges in adjusting to living and learning in their new environment (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).

No matter how prepared international students are academically, how proficient they are in English, or how familiar they are with U.S. cultural norms, they still face unique challenges to succeed in a foreign environment away from friends, family, and familiar surroundings. (Mamiseishvili, 2012)

Sherry, Thomas, and Chui (2010) asserted if institutions do not address the unique needs of international students, students may be left feeling disappointed, unfulfilled, and even exploited.

In this review, the researcher discusses international students' language proficiency in the section one. In the second section, the researcher reviews prior research on international students' academic issues, and in the third section, she discusses international students' cultural dissonance. Hanassab and Tidwell (2002) pointed out that educators cannot neglect the needs of international students coming to the United States.

Also, Hanassab and Tidwell (2002) indicated that that a critical challenge for every college and university is to educate its diverse student population so that they are multi-culturally competent and can function successfully in American's pluralistic society.

### **Methods of the Literature Review**

The researcher reviewed literature on challenges international students confront when they study in America. The main search engines the researcher used were: Academic Search Premier (EBSCO), Google Scholar, JSTOR and ERIC (Education) from FirstSearch. Some of the search terms were: Chinese students, Intensive English Program, English as a Second Language, and international students. The researcher did not find many articles that focused on international students' experiences in the Intensive English Program in America, so she expanded her search circle to international students' learning experience in the United States. Furthermore, in order to get more helpful articles for the study, the researcher consulted the reference sections of useful articles.

### **Language Proficiency**

International students face many barriers when arriving in the United States for postsecondary study (Crockett & Hays, 2011), such as racial discrimination, social exclusion, finance difficulties, and homesickness (Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2010). Besides these issues, language difficulties appear to be the most challenging issue for the majority of international students (Mori, 2000). The language barrier can inhibit international students in every aspect of their academic and social experience.

Chalungsooth and Schneller (2011) suggested that language difficulties are one source of stress for international students, and individuals with underdeveloped language

skills report lower level of academic success and social functioning. Many international students get the impression that any experiences of social isolation are due to their deficiencies in the English language (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). Similarly, previous authors reported that a lack of English skills (a) is likely to affect international students' academic performance, (b) hinder them from socially interacting with their American peers (Lin & Yi, 1997; Hayes & Ling, 1994, as cited in Yeh & Inose, 2003), and (c) has direct negative implications for the teaching performance of graduate teaching assistants (Mori, 2000). Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) concluded that international students' English level competency or discomfort about speaking English may impede their interactions with the new community to fulfill their initial needs.

A segment of the literature stresses that English language proficiency is vital to the success of international students (Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2010). Without adequate language skills, students' ability to understand lectures, to take notes, to complete reading and writing assignments and examinations, and to express orally their opinions and ask questions in classes are diminished (Cadieux & Wehrly, 1986, as cited in Mori, 2000). However, many international students come with years of English study but with limited spoken or colloquial language skills; they often are unprepared to use English at the intense level of university reading assignments as well as lectures and class discussions (Ping, 1999). According to Sherry, Thomas and Chui (2010), they reported that international students have more spoken language barriers rather than written language problems.

In a quantitative study, Yeh and Inose (2003) found that higher frequency of using English and language fluency level lowered international students' level of distress and helped them feel comfortable in America. Additionally, Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) indicated that English language proficiency is an important factor in predicting students' academic achievement.

### **Academic Issues**

Transitioning to a whole new culture can be difficult for international students, especially when they have to learn to function in a new academic setting. Mori (2000) pointed out that one cause of international students' academic problems is their unfamiliarity with the American educational system.

Within academic life, international students face challenges such as English language barriers, developing relationships with advisors and professors, and in most cases getting used to teaching and curriculum differences such as the expectations for class discussion or questioning the teacher (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007, p.30).

In the United States, international students encounter a different educational system, which requires mastery of different study skills and learning styles (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002). They must adjust to a U.S. education system that is defined by very different values, beliefs, customs, and traditions (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011). It is not easy for them, especially for the ones who come from Asia because "a typical image of an Eastern classroom involves a teacher conducting expositive teaching in front of a large class of well-disciplined students, seated in rows" (Zhang, 2007). Asian international students are highly unaccustomed to various components of the American educational system (Thomas & Althen, 1989, as cited in Mori, 2000). Mori (2000) stated these students are unfamiliar with independent library research, creative or even standard



essays and term papers, frequent “pop” quizzes and exams, and active participation in informal class discussions.

Zhao, Kuh and Carini (2005) found that first-year international students surpassed their American counterparts in levels of academic challenges and student-faculty interaction. But by their senior year, international student tended to be more adapted to the academic context. It is likely that a greater length of stay in America is associated with better levels of academic adaptation. In a qualitative research study, Mittal and Wieling (2006) reported that length of stay in the U.S. affected the experiences of international students (Araujo, 2011).

Researchers also studied whether there are factors that have positive influence on international students’ academic life. Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) cited an earlier study by Rai (2002) showed that faculty’s knowledge of different cultures and encourage consideration of students’ culture in lectures aid the students’ adjustment to academic life.

### **Cultural Dissonance**

Culture has a major impact on how international students adapt to the United States. Although all students encounter some stressful circumstances during college, international students face many special challenges as they transition into new academic and social roles (Mori, 2000; Sodowsky & Plake, 1992; Thomas & Althen, 1989, as cited in Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011).

Given their culturally diverse backgrounds, international students may experience adjustment strains within their host environment that are unique to them, such as cultural differences and social behaviors (Araujo, 2011). Sherry, Thomas and Chui (2010)

asserted that international students are often very lonely in their new environment. Such loneliness includes not only the lack of familiar friends and social networks, but also the lack of familiar cultural and/or linguistic environments (Adelman, 1988; McClure, 2007; Sawir et al, 2008; Zhao et al, 2008; Ip et al, 2009, as cited in Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2010).

Zhang (2007) pointed out that culture has a strong influence on the communication and learning systems. Cross-cultural differences in social interaction may prevent international students from forming close relationships with American students (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992, as cited in Yeh & Inose, 2003).

However, it is notable that this phenomenon varies based on the different cultures and nations from which students come. Upon arrival to the new country, individual reactions to the host country and culture may vary (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Students from a more individualistic culture may identify with the U.S. mainstream culture, while the ones from a more collectivist culture may feel distant (Swagler & Ellis, 2003; Triandis, 1991, as cited in Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). For example, students from collectivistic cultural backgrounds may prioritize close relationships and may feel confused when interacting with American students who tend to emphasize aspects of individualism, such as independence, assertiveness, and self-reliance (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Cross, 1995, as cited in Yeh & Inose, 2003). Likewise, in a quantitative study, Yeh and Inose (2003) reported that European students fit in American society more easily than their Asian, African and Latin/Central American counterparts.

More important, Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) cited an empirical study by Prieto (1995) stated that if international students have a satisfying contact with the host culture and live in a pleasant social atmosphere, they are more likely to have positive experiences and achieve their educational goals.

## **Conclusion**

In Chapter Two, the researcher reviewed literature and found that there is little research that focused on Intensive English students' learning experiences. Indeed, there is an extensive array of research that has been done to examine international students' language proficiency, academic challenges, social problems, cultural adjustment, homesickness, and discrimination. Therefore the purpose of this study was to describe Chinese Intensive English students' experiences and their learning process, and then to explored how they perceived this program at UNL.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

Qualitative research methodology was applied in this study because the researcher wanted to provide a descriptive and in-depth understanding of each participant's perception and attitude with regard to the Intensive English Program. The participants were ten Chinese Intensive English students who were enrolled in the Spring 2013 academic semester at UNL.

In order to understand the participants' voice (McMillan, 2011, p.282); the researcher conducted a phenomenological study.

#### **Qualitative Research Design**

According to Creswell (2007), the definition of qualitative research is this:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a world view, the possible use of theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns and themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem and it extends the literature or signals a call for action. (p.37)

The qualitative approach enabled the researcher to fully understand Chinese Intensive English students' learning experiences.

There are five major types of qualitative research: (a) phenomenological study, (b) ethnography, (c) grounded theory, (d) case studies, and (e) critical studies (McMillan, 2011, p.14-15). For the purpose of this study, the phenomenological approach was

selected because it describes and interprets the experiences of participants in order to understand the “essence” of the experience as perceived by the participants (McMillan, 2011, p.282) and to “determine what an experience means for persons who have had the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, as cited by Creswell, 2007, p.58). Creswell (2007) also noted that this approach is important to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences of a phenomenon (p.60). The phenomenon in this study was Chinese Intensive English students’ learning experiences. More important, these common experiences can be used to develop practices or policies (p.60) for the program and the university.

This phenomenological approach requires the researcher to monitor herself to reduce prejudice and bias in order to “elicit and better understand the meanings given by the participants” (McMillan, 2011, p.282). In other words, the researcher needs to suspend, or “bracket” (p.282). Creswell (2007) also indicated that researchers “set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination” (p.59-60). The researcher herself was an international student, so it was important for her not to let her personal experiences interfere with the study.

There are two types of phenomenology: hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990, as cited by Creswell, 2007, p.59) and empirical, transcendental, or psychological phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994, as cited by Creswell, 2007, p.59). The present study used the transcendental phenomenology because “it focused less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of participants” (Moustakas,

1994, as cited by Creswell, 2007, p.59). Thus the researcher needed to hold back her pre-conceived notions and concentrate on the participants' experiences.

### **Research Questions**

The major question was: How do Chinese international students perceive their experiences in the Intensive English Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln? The main question contained other sub-questions that helped to better understand the phenomena. These sub-questions (RQ) were as follows:

RQ1: What language skills did Chinese students think were their most insufficient abilities?

RQ2: What language skills did Chinese students think were their most confident abilities?

RQ3: Do Chinese students believe IEP serve their language needs?

RQ4: Do Chinese students think IEP help them transition to American academic context more smoothly?

RQ5: Do Chinese students think IEP help them transition to American social context more smoothly?

### **Researcher Role**

The researcher was a Master of Arts student majoring in Higher Education Administration with specialization in Student Affairs at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She was also an international student. Her personal background made her aware that international students are a disadvantaged group when they communicate with native English speakers in academic or social environment. The Intensive English language

students are more likely to encounter challenges because of their less-prepared English skills. These experiences made the researcher passionate about her study topic—exploring and describing Chinese Intensive English students’ learning experiences.

Additionally, the researcher understood she must take a neutral perspective to consider the participants’ experiences and set aside her prior opinion or judgments because “to fully describe how participants view the phenomenon, researchers must bracket out, as much as possible, their own experience” (Creswell, 2007, p.61). These are the requirements of the transcendental phenomenology. The researcher should eliminate any subjective elements that might interfere with the study.

### **Research Site**

The study was conducted at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. This higher institution has more than 1300 international students. Chinese students make up 40% of the international student population. Additionally, the researcher selected the Nebraska Union as the qualitative research site for two reasons. First, students found it easy to identify the location because they used it frequently for learning and social purpose. Second, students were familiar with the environment; they were likely to feel comfortable to share experiences when they were in interviews.

### **Sampling Procedure**

Given the goals and logic of qualitative research, “purposive” sampling is often employed (Devers & Frankel, 2000). The researcher used this type of sampling because it “can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p.125). This sampling is designed to enhance

understandings of selected individuals or groups' experiences(s) or for developing theories and concepts (Devers & Frankel, 2000). Utilizing purposive sampling required the researcher to "first determine what selection criteria are essential in choosing the people to be studied" (Merriam, 1998, p.61). Thus, the researcher's selection criteria included (a) Chinese Intensive English students not in the Partnership Degree Programs, (b) 19 years of age or older, and (c) enrolled in 2013 spring academic semester at UNL.

With these criteria in mind, the researcher contacted students in order to recruit them for her research project. After the researcher received the approval letter from the Office of the Intensive English Program (see Appendix I), she provided 80 copies of solicitation letters (see Appendix II) to the coordinator of the office. Then the coordinator asked the instructors to pass out these letters to Chinese students to encourage them to participate in the study. The solicitation letter explained the purpose and the procedure of the study and provided the researcher's e-mail address and phone number so that students who were willing to participate in the study could contact her.

The students in each level (Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced) self-selected for participation in the qualitative study by responding to the solicitation letter. When the researcher had identified ten participants, she sent a reminder email (see Appendix III) to each participant to let him or her know the interview location, time and how long one interview might take.

### **Research Participants**

The research participants were ten Chinese students, five males and five females, who were enrolled in the Intensive English Program in Spring 2013 academic semester at



UNL. These participants were not in the Partnership Degree Programs between UNL and two Chinese universities. The ten participants fulfilled Polkinghorne's (1988) recommendation, which was cited by Creswell (2007) that researchers interview from 5 to 25 individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon (p.61).

Table 2: List of Participants

<b>Male</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>5</b>

All participants in the study came from China. Five were in Basic Level, four were in Intermediate Level, and one was in Advanced Level.

Table 3: List of Participants' Learning Level

<b>Basic Level</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Intermediate Level</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Advanced Level</b>	<b>1</b>

Some of the participants were friends because they were in the same learning level; others did not know each other.

### **Instrument and Data Collection Procedures**

The interview technique was selected for this qualitative study to collect data because "it allows for greater depth and richness of information" (McMillan, 2011, p.167). Each one-on-one semi-structured interview relied on ten questions in order to gain Chinese Intensive English students' attitudes and perceptions about the program (see Appendix IV). These questions consisted of open questions, multiple questions and

probing questions. Few closed-end questions were included. Every interview lasted for about 15 to 20 minutes and was audio recorded with the permission of the interviewee.

Before the interview was conducted by the researcher, each participant was given an informed consent form (see Appendix V) to read. The participant approved and signed the form before the interview started. During the interviews, the participants were encouraged to ask questions if they want the researcher to clarify questions. According to McMillan (2011), more accurate responses are obtained as the interviewer clarifies questions for the subject may have and follows up leads (probing) (p.167). The researcher conducted these individual interviews with participants using Chinese, which made it possible for her to not only stay focused on the participants' answers but their body language. She followed McMillan's (2011) advice to observe nonverbal responses and behaviors that may indicate the need for further questioning to clarify verbal answers (p.167). The researcher took notes on the participants' body language and facial reflection.

### **Data Recording**

All the interviews were audio recorded and the audio files were stored on the researcher's personal computer.

### **Data Analysis**

The goal of the analysis is to discover patterns, ideas, explanations, and "understanding" (McMillan, 2011, p.297). Creswell (2007) indicated that data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data for analysis, then

reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion (p.148).

Firstly, the researcher read and reviewed the transcripts and notes. These notes were taken to show the participant's body language and facial reflections. The researcher used the notes to better understand the participants' perceptions. Sometimes the participants laughed when they heard the question; it was a sign that they had been asked the question a lot by others or they never expected to have this question. Then the researcher highlighted the similar or the same answers. She put these answers into different categories so the likely answers could be discussed respectively. After she did that, the researcher started to develop the initial themes. In order to get the eventual themes, the researcher reviewed the data again to check if any data missed. The themes were analyzed and discussed.

Data analysis was a time-consuming and challenging process. The researcher organized a large amount of data and reduced those data to a small number of themes. This procedure enhanced reporting objective findings. Finally, suggestions were given to the program and the university and implications were given to future researchers based on the analysis.

### **Member Checking**

Member checking, an important method for data validation in qualitative studies, a way of finding out whether the data analysis is congruent with the participants' experiences (Curtin & Fossey, 2007, p.92). After the ten one-on-one interviews had been completed by the researcher (the interviews were audio recorded), she transcribed them.

The transcripts were sent to the participants who were asked to read and review for accuracy. The participants were invited to add more information as perceived necessary for clarification. The participants also had opportunities to remove information if they felt uncomfortable with the content. Generally, participants may be asked to edit, clarify, elaborate, and at times, delete their own words from the narratives (Carlson, 2010) and confirm the findings at last (McMillan, 2011, p.303).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The interview questions and the procedures involved in the research were reviewed by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board (IRB) before the study was conducted. All participants signed informed consent forms that were approved by the IRB before interviews. They were informed that they could withdraw at any time throughout the interviews without harming their relationship with the researcher, the Intensive English Program or the university.

The researcher considered the participants' safety and anonymity in this study. Participants' name and information were kept confidential, through assignment of pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy. All identifying data were removed from the results.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe Chinese Intensive English students' learning experiences and to investigate how they perceived their study experiences in this program at UNL. To be more specific, this study was focused on exploring whether Chinese Intensive English students think the program helped them transition to American academic and social environment more smoothly. In this chapter, the researcher presents three important themes that arose from the individual interviews with participants.

#### **Introduction to Participants**

All participants in this study were Chinese students studying in the Intensive English program at UNL during the Spring 2013 academic semester. These students studied at different levels, five were in Basic Level, four were in Intermediate Level, and one was in Advanced Level. The ten participants are 19 years or older. Each of them was asked ten questions during the face-to-face interview.

#### **Research Questions**

RQ1: What language skills did Chinese students think were their most insufficient abilities?

RQ2: What language skills did Chinese students think were their most confident abilities?

RQ3: Do Chinese students believe IEP serve their language needs?

RQ4: Do Chinese students think IEP help them transition to American academic context more smoothly?

RQ5: Do Chinese students think IEP help them transition to American social context more smoothly?

## **Study Findings**

The ten participants were asked about how they evaluated their language ability and how they considered their learning experience in the Intensive English program at UNL in 2013 Spring academic semester. Furthermore, their outside-the-classroom experiences had been presented.

During each interview, the researcher asked the participant why they chose to study in the Intensive English program at UNL rather than prepared TOEFL or IELTS tests while they were in China. This was an important question because it helped the researcher to better understand the participants' thoughts.

Overall participants answered this question and everyone held one same reason—the authentic language learning environment is good for improving English. Participant 1 said:

You know in China, the competition in National College Entrance Exam is very fierce. I don't know if I can pass it. My parents encouraged me to study abroad, and my friends told me that the length of preparing TOEFL or IELTS test in China is very long. I didn't want to do that. I would like to study in America as soon as possible. I also know that the environment is important for learning language, so I came here to study in the program. Now I feel I am in a real English environment and this is...hmm, of course good for my studying.

Participant 3 echoed this, "I wanted to study on America campus soon and I didn't want to spend much time preparing TOFEL test. Also, I know the real native-English

environment can help me develop my language skills faster because I have to use English every day.”

When participant 8 was asked why she did not take the TOEFL or IELTS test in China, she seemed a little down. “Ah, I did! I took more than one year to prepare my IELTS test, but I didn’t get the satisfactory score. My score didn’t meet the university’s admission requirement.” Participant 6 shared the similar experience, “I took the IELTS test in China, and I got 6. I want to study in graduate level but this score didn’t meet UNL’s academic acceptance. Hence I enrolled in the IEP to study English.” Participant 7 said, “Once my life was occupied by preparing the TOEFL test, I didn’t like it. I want to study in the authentic language environment. I believe my English can be improved quickly in the IEP.”

Participant 5 also mentioned how hard to get the satisfactory score in either TOEFL or IELTS test:

Since I was a sophomore in high school, I enrolled in the international department in my school. Students in this department are willing to study abroad after graduation. We learned English every day, every class, every hour. Our study goal was getting good scores in the two English proficiency tests [TOEFL and IELTS] that meet universities’ admission requirement. I remember I took the TOEFL test several times...hmm, about four times; the highest score I got was 55. The reading and listening aspects in the test are so hard. I thought the TOEFL test was so difficult for me; maybe the IELTS test could be easier. So I took it. However, I still couldn’t get a good score. I couldn’t bear the tests anymore. Additionally, my parents thought it is likely that the real English speaking environment could help me learn English. So I’m here. And the program does help me improve my English abilities.

Participant 10 also elaborated the reasoning for coming to study in the IEP, he explained:

I never took TOEFL test in China. The test may help you enroll in the university earlier than other students who have to study in the IEP, but, the point is, you just take classes in undergraduate level earlier than us. I want to know more about the academic system and social rules before I study in the university. I do believe these

can help me transition to the institution in higher education more smoothly. Therefore my parents sent me here [as an Intensive English student].

The main reasons the participants came to study in the IEP were: (a) the authentic English learning environment, (b) the length of preparing for the TOEFL or IELTS test is extremely long, (c) these students had trouble getting good scores in the TOEFL or IELTS test while in China, and (d) the students wanted to experience the American educational system before they take classes in the university.

### **Overview of Themes**

During the individual interviews, the participants were asked about how they assessed their language ability and how they considered their learning experience in the Intensive English program and their outside-the-classroom experiences. The researcher organized and reduced the data obtained from the interviews to three themes. The first theme was self-learning proficiency evaluation, the second theme was learning experiences in the Intensive English Program, and the third theme was outside-the-classroom experiences. Each theme had subthemes in order to better clarify the findings.

### **Theme: Self-Language Proficiency Evaluation**

#### ***Subtheme: Listening and speaking used to be my insufficient skills***

The majority of participants stated that they had deficient listening and speaking skills upon arrival in America. Participant 2 said, “My prior home-country English instruction makes reading and writing become my strongest language skills.

Unfortunately, my listening and speaking sucked! I couldn’t communicate with Americans when I had just come here.” Participant 9 stated, “I didn’t realize my listening and speaking were not good when I was in China, I mean, we just took exams, and my



scores in the listening section were good, so I believed my listening was good. However,” he went on to say:

The first time I had to use English to talk with Americans, the experience was really...hmm, I don't want to recall my feelings. I bought drinks in WalMart, when I brought them to the cashier; the man said “How are you doing?” I was totally didn't know how to reply to him. I just looked at him and felt embarrassed. I mean, now [of course] I know it just means “Hello”, and you only need to say “Good, how are you?” It's so simple. But that time, I really didn't know what to say. In China, we spoke English just for reciting the textbook; we never use English to talk with others.

Participant 8 had the similar thought, she said:

When I was in China, I thought my listening was good because I could understand my English teacher's instruction, I also believed my speaking was good because I could answer my teacher's questions. Unfortunately, what I thought weren't what I really had. I lived in the residential hall, and the first day I arrived there I needed to get a room card from the front desk. I tried to tell the lady what I needed, but she couldn't understand me. Then she said something, but I couldn't get her meaning. The only thing I could do was smile. This experience made me know my speaking and listening skills were poor.

Participant 3 described a picture to express how bad her listening and speaking were. She talked about:

I remember when I was waiting for my connection flight at the airport; I was hungry and thirsty. I wanted to buy food. But I wasn't able to. I didn't know how to order food, and I was afraid if Americans couldn't understand me when I spoke English. It was really bad. I wish I could arrive in Lincoln as soon as possible because my friend would pick me up at the airport, and then he could take me to eat something!

Participant 7 discussed the reasons:

When I was in China, I didn't have many opportunities to practice my spoken English. We students just listened to our English teacher's instructions and took notes in class. Our study goal was passing the National College Entrance Exam. The Exam doesn't test spoken language skill, so we never practiced it. What's more, when I was going to take the Exam that year, the listening testing section had been eliminated. Therefore we didn't practice listening skill anymore. We only read and wrote.

***Subtheme: I can understand what the instructor says now***

When asked about how they evaluated their language skills after they took classes in the IEP, more than half of the participants presented that they had improved in their listening. Participant 8 simply pointed out, “At first, I had no idea about what the instructor was saying. Sometimes I just guessed through his body language or facial expressions. Maybe I could understand 30%. But now, I can fully comprehend his teaching.” Then she used an example between her and her Resident Assistant (RA) to further explain how she observed her own progress.

The first time I met my RA, she tried to tell me something [submit a form], but I couldn’t understand what she said. She spoke so fast, I even wasn’t able to get one single word’s meaning! I felt my listening was so bad that time and I lacked self-confidence. Last week, I happened to meet my RA in the dining hall. I’m surprised to see that I can understand 70% of what she was saying. I can’t use words to describe my feeling. I’m very happy and proud of myself. The IEP classes help me a lot. Without the IEP, it’s impossible for me to improve my listening as fast as this.

Participant 2 also discussed how she self-monitored her listening improvement:

I am placed in Intermediate Level after the EPE test. In the first class...hmm, not only the first class, I think it lasted for a couple week. I couldn’t understand my instructor’s teaching. After one half of the session, I can understand more. It’s a miracle for me! I think maybe it’s because I study in the real English learning environment, and I use English every day.

***Subtheme: I become confident to speak and I get a huge progress with my spoken***

***English***

In response to identify their most confident language aspect after they enrolled in the IEP, eight of the participants stated the point that they became confident to use oral English to communicate with Americans. Participant 6 said, “I have the confidence to speak now, not only in the class but also after class. What I learn in the class helped me

find topics to talk with Americans. I can see the progress in my speaking.” Participant 2 expressed the similar thoughts, “I feel less language barriers with native speakers in the daily interaction. Sometimes if I don’t know how to say one thing, I can use another way to describe it.”

Participant 9 said, “Speaking used to be my most challenging skill, but now I can feel my speaking has been improved great. I can discuss with my instructor in class, and he can understand me.” Participant 10 was very confident to use English to communicate with native English speakers now. He pointed out, “Even some Americans don’t use correct grammar when they speak, I mean they make grammatical errors sometimes, so I think if I can express something clearly to them, we can communicate without barriers.”

Participant 8 became increasingly confident to speak in class. She explained:

My speaking has been trained a lot by the instructor. In the beginning of this IEP session, when I faced new topics, I didn’t know how to use English to express my ideas. I wanted to speak in Chinese. However I couldn’t. I had to try different ways to make my instructor get my opinions. It was hard at first, but it’s working. Now when the instructor gives me a topic to say, I can say a lot, I can express myself. Although I still make grammatical errors when I speak, but I have faith to open my mouth to say. It’s really important.

## **Theme: Learning Experience in the Intensive English Program**

### ***Subtheme: Instructors are helpful***

The first subtheme under Learning Experience in the Intensive English Program was that instructors are helpful. Overall participants held the positive opinion. Participant 6 said, “One instructor in the program had stayed in China for three years. He is such a knowledgeable man. I like to talk to him, and I learn a lot from him.” Participant 1 stated, “Sometimes the instructor gives us an assignment to interview American students, I think

it's a good way for us to communicate with native speakers. And it's funny. I like this teaching method." Moreover, he provided his idea from another angle, "Instructors know how to better explain one thing to make our international students understand. Learning another language is hard and a little boring, but I'm happy to have these instructors."

Participant 8 mentioned a writing teacher in the program, she said:

This lady requires us to revise our essay more than three times. We need to totally comprehend the essay's requirement and brainstorm what we want to write at the first time, at the second time, we draw an outline of our essay and then synthesize each part, finally, we check our grammar. We make little grammatical error in the essay because of the three times revisions. I believe this is not only a good habit in writing essay, but I also can apply it to other fields. It helps me be a careful person.

Participant 5 also talked about how helpful and nice the instructors are:

Teachers in the IEP are so nice and patient. Some instructors don't consider us as ESL students; actually, they view us as undergraduates. Besides the language learning, they also teach us the way to search academic references online or in the library. Additionally, they even educate us how to write resume and cover letters. I think this is a great way for us to understand American education.

### ***Subtheme: Vocabulary is very important***

The ten participants agreed that the vocabulary plays an essential role in studying.

Participant 5 said, "Reading seems a little difficult for me because I lack enough vocabulary, but I even don't know where to start to learn words." Participant 7 echoed this, "I want to improve my vocabulary, but I don't know which book I can use to learn words." Participant 9 said, "My EPE test score was bad, especially the score in the reading section. I met many new words." Participant 10 indicated, "The vocabulary in the EPE test is so hard." Participant 1 explained more:

In the EPE test [the one is at the end of one IEP session], reading, grammar and vocabulary are tested in one group called usage. It's the hardest part! I got the lowest

score compared to my other sections. I don't know how to choose one word's synonym from the sentence. Sometimes I even don't know the meaning of the sentence. My vocabulary is poor.

Participant 8 also discussed how insufficient vocabulary impeded her learning:

Instructors encourage us to read more English books. I feel my biggest shortcoming in learning language is I read few English books. Hmm...how to say...[she seemed a little depressed], I'm not lazy and I want to read. But I'm not able to understand the content of books, I think I lack enough vocabulary.

***Subtheme: What I learn at class is not being tested***

When asked about their feelings when they got their EPE score, participant 5 said she was a little disappointed, "I think I deserve a better score." Then she went on to say, "There is a big difference between what we learn at class and the test, I mean, why the test doesn't examine what we learn at class?" Participant 7 said, "I go to class every day, never late for class. What I learn at class doesn't help me pass the test. I'm curious why the test has no correlation with the class." Participant 2 stated, "I've studied in the IEP for two sessions, the EPE test doesn't test what I learn at class, I feel, in a sense, I lose some motivation." Participant 4 pointed out, "The listening in the EPE test is so easy. I don't think it makes an objective appraisal."

Participant 3 shared the same things:

I must say my learning experience in the IEP is happy. But I don't think the EPE test is reasonable. The EPE test here, I mean, is the test at the end of each session. It doesn't test what we learn at class. Listening section is very easy. The test doesn't reflect our English level. Moreover, I don't think our textbook connects to the test.

***Subtheme: Independent study plays a significant role***

All participants stated the independent study may be the most effective way to improve their language skills. Participant 1 said, “I need to improve self-conscious in order to develop my English.” Participant 4 maintained:

I have a lot of spare time every day. The length of my class time is between about 8:30am to 2:20pm. After class, I begin to do my homework. If I don’t know how to do it, I’ll discuss with my classmates. I usually can finish it before 5pm. At first, I didn’t know how to deal with the plenty of time. Then I realized it’s a good chance for me to develop my independent study skill. For example, I watch American movie to practice my listening skill. I’m in Advanced Level now, I think I can pass the test and enroll in the UNL in this Fall semester.

Participant 6 strongly asserted the importance of independent study:

I didn’t know international students are required to take the EPE test at the beginning of each semester. I didn’t take it. Then I was placed in Basic Level. I think my language ability meets the Intermediate Level’s requirement. But that’s fine; it was my fault to miss the test. There is a book focusing on the IEP test, I bought it and I did exercise on it. I also go to the Language Lab after class to practice the test. I understand nobody but yourself can make you get what you want. I mean people can help you, but they can’t give you what you’d like. It’s your own responsibility [to get something].

Participant 10 discussed:

The learning environment in the IEP is relaxed. Instructors don’t push you to study. They are not very strict. It’s like...hmm, a language school in China. So if you lack independent study skill, you are hardly to learn something. I want to pass the test as soon as possible and then study at the UNL, so I make a daily study schedule by myself. I organize my spare time [after class].

**Theme: Outside-the-Classroom Experience**

***Subtheme: I am shy to take part in the IEP Club***

When asked about the social activities organized by the IEP, participant 5 said she wanted to join these activities but she was so nervous, “Well, I totally understand these

activities may help me get adjusted to the campus or the society. But I can't take part in them, I mean...hmm, I am such an introvert girl, I don't comfortable in the activities."

Participant 9 had similar thoughts, "I always stay at home after class. I don't like to communicate with others because of my disposition. I feel nervous when I'm in these activities." Participant 7 went on to provide more details:

Sometimes the IEP Club's activity was inviting several American students to the classroom to talk with international students. This is good but I never take part in it. Hmm...I mean, don't you think it's a little weird? I felt I was pushed to shoot the breeze with them. I'm a shy person and I'm easy to get nervous. And this activity really made me scared. The feeling is absolutely different compared to this situation: you meet an American you know on the way to school, and you two begin to chat.

***Subtheme: My friends are Chinese students and other international students***

A great deal of the participants stated that their friends are mostly Chinese students and other international students. Participant 5 said, "My friends are all Chinese. I feel comfortable to stay with them. We go shopping and hanging out together." Participant 2 expressed her idea, "I know many Chinese students and Arab students. They're my classmates. I don't have many opportunities to know Americans." Then she went on to provide more details, "I grasp every opportunity to talk with American students in the IEP Club. We talk at that time, but after that, we never meet again." Participant 3 shared the same thought, "I want to make American friends, but it's hard. Americans are nice, but we can't be friends. I don't know why. Maybe it's because the language barrier."

Participant 7 said more about his friends' circle:

"Besides Chinese friends, my friends are other international students. Because we're international students, we can understand each other better. We face the same problems no matter in language or in cultural differences. I find it's hard to make American friends. I don't mean they are unkind; actually they're very nice, but I

feel distance between us. It's hard to establish close relationship with them. I don't think the reason is the language barrier because I also use English to talk with other international students. I don't know if the cultural differences make it difficult to make American friends, however, I don't share the same cultural rule with other international students, too. I really don't know why."

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this qualitative study was allowing Chinese Intensive English students to self-evaluate their language skills, describing their learning experience and investigating their perceptions toward to the program. The suggestions on how the Intensive English Program at institutions of higher education in America better serve international students in order to help them have more positive experience were discussed in Chapter 5. In the next chapter, the researcher summarized the findings and provided recommendations to the program.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

International students may be regarded as a “group who is expected to adjust to a narrowly defined set of roles and behaviors in the U.S. educational system and American society” (Hanassab, 2006). Also, it is noted that they have an impact on the institutions of higher learning across the United States, an impact that is increasing in magnitude (Hanassab, 2002). Therefore the importance of understanding this group of students is growing. Universities and colleges cannot just focus on recruiting these students, in other words, they are expected to better “hear” these students voices.

This phenomenological study aimed at describing Chinese Intensive English students’ learning experiences and investigating their perceptions toward this program at an American university. Ten face-to-face interviews were used to collect data. The data were analyzed and organized in themes and subthemes.

This chapter summarized the results, offered recommendations for the program and suggestions for future research.

## Summary of Findings

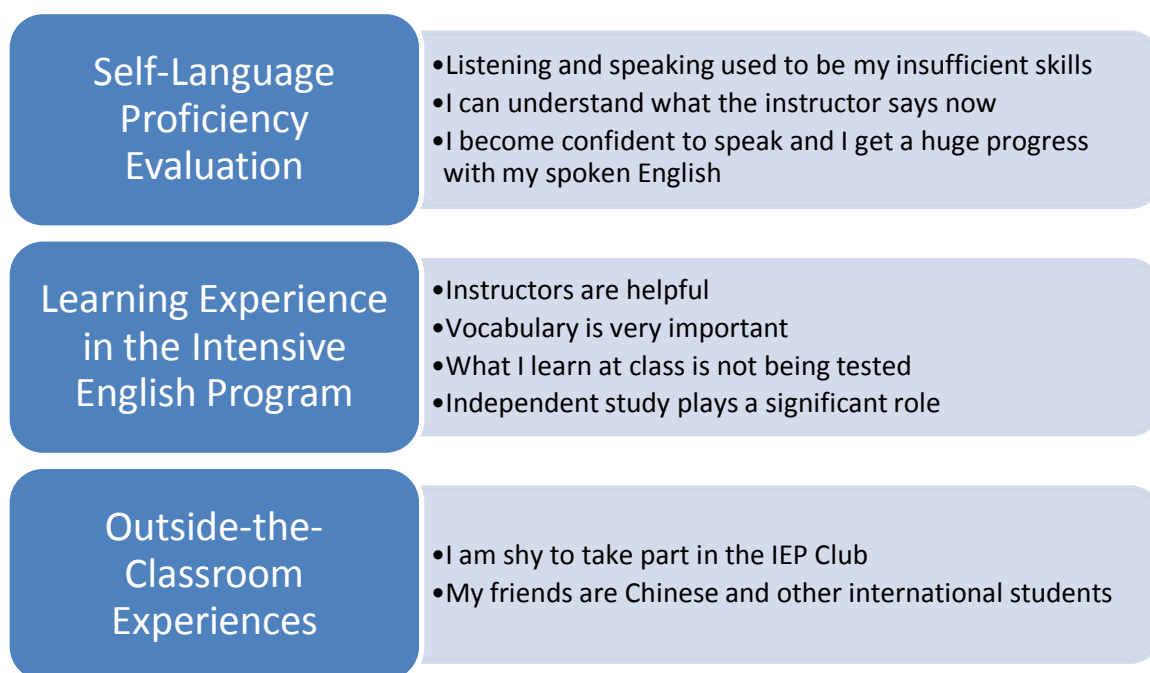


Figure 1: Summary of Findings

More than half of the participants observed their great progress with listening and speaking. After they took classes in the IEP, they rated their self-confidence to communicate with native speakers at a higher level. They noted that what they learned from the class had not been tested in the EPE test and were curious about why that disconnect occurred. Also, they said that the IEP Club was helpful, but not as effective as they expected.

Furthermore, the participants reported that their friend-circles consisted of Chinese students and other international students. They stated that they wanted to make American friends, but they did not know how to establish close relationships with American students. This is important because when Chinese students are able to regularly interact with American students, they would be able to improve their English abilities.

To sum up, the majority of the participants were satisfied with the program, but the level they satisfaction depended on how long they had to study in the program. That is, the students reported lower level of satisfaction when they studied longer in the program. Additionally, these participants also held very specific ideas about what they expected from the instructors and the IEP.

According to the findings, there is an urgent need for instructors and administrators who work in the Intensive English Program to take the following recommendations into consideration.

### **Recommendations Offered from the Participants**

The participants provided recommendations for the program and future international students. First, the program needs to offer classes that focus on vocabulary. Overall participants said they were aware that they lacked sufficient vocabulary, and they hoped the program could offer classes in this separate area.

Second, the EPE test should have a connection with the material covered in the textbooks. Participant 2 noted, “The test doesn’t evaluate what we learn from the class. It makes me lack motivation. I begin to feel bored.” Apart from the correlation between the textbook and the test content, participant 1 went further, he said:

The textbook are very expensive in America. I want make my every penny count. However, the teacher even doesn’t finish teaching the book. Sometimes he just uses one half of the book. I’ve stayed in Basic Level for three sessions, what’s worse, after one session, it’s possible that our reading teacher is changed, and he doesn’t use the same book as my prior reading teacher used. But I think the content is similar, so why they can’t use the same book to teach us? I feel it’s a waste of money.

Third, the participants indicated a wish that language instruction be more integrated with academic course content. That is, it is important that English language examples be drawn from academic content. This recommendation came from the participants who had spent more than four months in the program. It seems that the longer they spend in the program, the lower the satisfaction levels. Participant 9 mentioned:

It's true that the program helps me improve my English, but I also feel...hmm, I mean, I'm already in the English-speaking environment, this environment will help me develop my English. The teacher teaches similar things again and again, I don't think it's necessary to spend such a long time, just for learning English. I want to know more about the academic things, which may help me transit to the university without difficulty.

Participant 2 indicated:

The longer I stay in the program in order to pass the test, the more I pay to get the degree. I can pay it, but I want my money spent in useful aspects. I want to learn something more academically.”

Finally, independent learning played a significant role in the learning process in America. All participants noted that the centrality of independent learning to the American system of education was challenging for them. In the East Asian and Chinese pedagogical culture, study and learning occurs in a highly structured and supervised manner. Students felt it would be helpful if the IEP program could provide more structure for the Chinese and East Asian students in order to help them transition into a very different American pedagogical environment.

### **Recommendations Offered from the Researcher**

It is noted that many international students use assistance from education agents to help them apply to universities. International student recruitment with the assistance from

education agents is prevalent in Asian countries and has a strong influence on whether and where a student will pursue postsecondary education (Pimpa, 2003).

Using education agents to assist students to pursue higher education outside of their home country has become a popular practice in China (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011). This is because reliable agents can save the student time by offering them useful information. In a mixed-method research conducted by Hagedorn and Zhang (2011), the researchers concluded the six most commonly services provided from education agents:

1. Choosing a destination country and/or institution.
  2. Preparing college application materials (e.g., providing a flowchart of application process, filling out the forms for clients, writing or editing any necessary English documents, etc.).
  3. Initiating contact with necessary personnel (e.g., admission officer, department secretary, program director, etc.) at target universities.
  4. Translating Chinese documents (e.g., support letters from high school teachers, parents' income statement, high school transcription, etc.) to English and translating English documents (University webpage, e-mails from the contact person in a foreign university, admission requirements, etc.) to Chinese.
  5. Preparing all necessary documents for student visa applications and/or training for face-to-face interviews with foreign-country embassy officers (this is particular to the agents who are specialized in U.S. college application). Some agents have English-speaking consultants to help students practice interview questions.
  6. Training for required admission tests such as TOEFL, IELTS, SAT, or ACT.
- (p.199)

Unfortunately, the quality of education agents cannot be guaranteed. It must be noted that although the majority of agents operate from a premise of finding the best institutions for their clients, not all education agents in China (or elsewhere) adhere to the highest of ethical standards (Franklin, 2008, as cited in Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011). Sometimes students feel what the agents told them are totally different than what they experience when they study in America. Thus, their experience does not meet their expectations.

Hence, much better information should be provided to students before they choose to come to study in the program. Building a database to recommend reputable agencies could be a useful method for Chinese students.

Intensive English Programs should consider seeking information from students who have successfully passed the EPE test about how to improve information on the website. Additionally, these previous students' learning experiences are able to guide prospective students. The programs need to place both test requirements and preparation method on the website.

Furthermore, students believe that instructors with bilingual language background are better able to teach grammar and are more helpful. When an instructor uses English to clarify English, it is a challenge for international students to fully comprehend the meaning.

Finally, the activities organized by the IEP Club need to be adjusted for meeting students' expectations. Students would like to have more opportunities to communicate with native speakers, but they anticipate communicating in an authentic environment, not only in a class setting. They expect to watch a movie or take a short trip with American students. In these situations, it is less likely for them to feel nervous.

### **Future Studies**

The present research offered students' view about the program; however, it did not assess students' performance. Furthermore, the study did not evaluate the interaction between students and instructors and how this relationship influence students' learning experience. Last but not least, the study did not examine previous Intensive English

students' performance to evaluate the usefulness of the program. These ideas were all from the interview data the researcher gathered. Therefore the researcher recommends the following topic for future studies:

- How does a student's prior homestay experience influence his/her performance in the IEP?
- What are the students' expectations before they study in the IEP?
- How does interaction with instructors help/hinder students' learning?
- How do previous Intensive English students' appraise their experience?
- How do previous Intensive English students think the program help them adjust well in the university?

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## Appendix I

Approval Letter from the Office of the Intensive English Program



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
Programs in English as a Second Language

February 6, 2013

Institutional Review Board  
Attention: Rachel Wenzl

To Whom It May Concern:

The Intensive English Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln has been asked by Yishi Long to participate in her research study "Explore Chinese international students' perceptions of their experience in an Intensive English Program at a U.S. midwestern university."

We understand that the Intensive English Program will only be involved by acting as a third-party recruiter by circulating a request for participation on Ms. Long's behalf. Her plan is to interview 10 students who are not part of the Partnership Degree Programs between UNL and Zhejiang University City College and Xi'an Jiaotong University City College during the Spring, 2013, semester. Students will not be allowed time from class to participate in the interviews.

Ms Long has agreed to provide a copy of her results to us.

We are pleased to be able to work with her. If there are any questions, please contact me.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Carol Ochsner".

Carol Ochsner  
Interim Coordinator, Programs in English as a Second Language

## Appendix II

### Solicitation Letter



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES  
Department of Educational Administration

Dear Chinese international students,

Your voice is needed! I would like to invite you to participate in my study.

The purpose of the study is to discover Chinese international students' attitudes about an Intensive English Program and explore your perceptions of the program's relationship to your academic and social success. Your feedback will be valued and will help UNL faculty and staff to improve the services for current and future students.

One one-on-one interview will be conducted with you in the study in order to describe your experiences at UNL. The interview consists of ten questions, which are open questions, multiple questions and probing questions. Each single interview lasts approximately 15-20 minutes long. In order to create a more comfortable environment, I will use Chinese to conduct the interview.

If you are interested in the study, please feel free to contact me either on the phone or email. I really appreciate your participation.

Sincerely,  
Yishi Long  
[dorislong501@gmail.com](mailto:dorislong501@gmail.com)  
402.417.6614  
Department of Educational Administration

### Appendix III

#### Reminder Email to Participants





COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES  
Department of Educational Administration

Dear Chinese international students,

Thanks for your participation! I really appreciate it.

Each one-on-one interview will be conducted in a private room in the Nebraska Union. Every single interview will be conducted after class. Interviews will take place between March 1<sup>st</sup> and March 20<sup>th</sup> at a time that is convenient to you. I will send you another friendly reminder email to confirm our meeting time.

If you have any questions about the time schedule or location, please feel free to contact me either on the phone or email.

Sincerely,  
Yishi Long  
[dorisloug501@gmail.com](mailto:dorisloug501@gmail.com)  
402.417.6614  
Department of Educational Administration

## Appendix IV

### Interview Questions

**Appendix D: interview questions**

- 1) How good did you perceive your English skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) while you were in China?
- 2) Did you know you were not good at English? If you know that, why not study when you were still in China? Why do you choose to study in the program in America?
- 3) How did you feel when you got the results of the EPE test?
- 4) Now you are in the program, which skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) did you have most difficulty with?
- 5) Which are your most confident parts of skills during your study in the program? Why?
- 6) How long do you think you will be at your current level before you move on to the next? Why?
- 7) What language skills do you think are the most important for you to succeed in the program?
- 8) How do you spend your spare time after class? Is there any gap between your expectation in China and the actual experience in America?
- 9) Do you think the IEP serve your needs of language?  
Probe 1) if it does, please state your reasons.  
Probe 2) if it does not, please state why you hold that negative opinion.
- 10) Overall, how would you describe your learning experience in the program?

## Appendix V

### Informed Consent Form



IRB# 20130213134 EX  
Date Approved: 02/25/2013  
Valid Until: 02/24/2018

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES  
Department of Educational Administration

### Informed Consent Form

#### *Purpose of Research*

This is a study to discover Chinese international students' attitudes about an intensive English program at an American Midwestern University and explore their perceptions of the program's relationship to their academic success. You were invited as a possible participant because you are a Chinese student coming to study in intensive English program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln during the spring 2013 academic semester. Also, that you meet the 19 years of age or older age requirement to participate in the study. The research will be conducted between February 2013 and March 2013, and will form the basis for Yishi Long's master's thesis, which should be completed by April 2013.

#### *Procedures*

One one-on-one interview will be conducted with you in order to describe your experience at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The interview will be recorded and will last approximately 15-20 minutes long in an agreed upon location. Moreover, you will be asked open questions, multiple questions and probing questions during the interview.

#### *Risks and/or Discomforts*

There are no known risks involved in this research

#### *Benefits*

The interviews will allow you to talk about your experience when you study at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. This research will be used to improve the services offered to international students at UNL.

#### *Confidentiality*

The information you provide during your interview will be used by the primary investigator to write a master thesis. The results may be published in professional publications. Your name and information will be kept confidential; a pseudonym will be assigned in the thesis in order to maintain your confidentiality.

Furthermore, the observations made by the primary investigator during the interview may be used to describe findings in the research. The data will be stored on the primary investigator's personal lap top and will be deleted following completion of the project in May 2013.

#### Participant Initials

141 Teachers College Hall / P.O. Box 880360 / Lincoln, NE 68588-0360 / (402) 472-3726 / FAX (402) 472-4300



IRB# 20130213134 EX  
Date Approved: 02/25/2013  
Valid Until: 02/24/2018

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES  
Department of Educational Administration

*Opportunity to ask Questions*

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study by contacting the investigators at the cell phone numbers listed below. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the thesis advisor, Dr. Miles Bryant at 402.472.0960. Furthermore, if you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Institutional Review Board at 402.472.6965.

*Freedom to Withdraw*

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time throughout the interview. You can also withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers, the Intensive English Program or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. You will not lose any benefits that you are entitled to.

*Consent, Right to Receive a Copy*

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have been decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_ Initial if you agree to be audio recorded during the interview.

*Signature of Participant:*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature of Research Participant*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

Name and Phone number of investigator(s)

Primary investigator

Yishi Long

[yishi.long501@huskers.unl.edu](mailto:yishi.long501@huskers.unl.edu)

402.417.6614

Secondary investigator

Dr. Miles Bryant

[mbryant1@unl.edu](mailto:mbryant1@unl.edu)

402.472.0960.

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