

**ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY**  
**FACULTY OF ARTS, HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**  
**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**POSITIONALITY AND TRAJECTORY ACROSS YEAR ONE:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF LOWER PROFICIENCY LEARNERS  
AT AN EMI UNIVERSITY IN HONG KONG**

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**OCTOBER 2021**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Vahid Parvaresh and Dr Sebastian Rasinger for their insights, guidance and support throughout this PhD study. I would also like to express my appreciation to my colleagues at the focal university for their ongoing encouragement and advice during the study. Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to the participants for their engagement in the research and for sharing their English journeys.

## ABSTRACT

This study provides a unique insight into the English journeys of first-year students at an English medium instruction (EMI) university in Hong Kong. The study focused on 10 students from various disciplines, who received equivalent English language scores of IELTS 5.48-5.68, generally the lowest score to enable entry to the university. Using the frameworks of desire and investment, the study investigated the tension between the participants' language and identity goals, and their struggle to enhance language proficiency and engage in the EMI experience.

Taking an ethnographic approach, written reflections and qualitative interviews were conducted in English at the beginning, middle and end of the academic year. The researcher, an English for Academic Purposes practitioner, also worked with the students through weekly language mentoring sessions. The research and mentoring were intended to benefit the participants by opening spaces for their English development and discussion of the themes. Thematic analysis was conducted on the data.

The findings show that participants held insecurities with their English due to past learning experiences and comparisons with university peers. The participants were highly invested in English but felt pressure to enhance their proficiency to meet university, employer and societal expectations. The participants became frustrated and critical of the EMI experience due to the lack of opportunities for informal interaction, internationalisation and quality teaching in English. Ultimately, though continuing to desire English, the participants reported minimal proficiency gains and lowered their language learning expectations. Lack of vocabulary was the most widely reported language frustration. By the end of year, the participants began to adopt more multi-perspective thinking about the EMI experience by understanding that lecturers, and the university itself, needed to maintain English as the medium of instruction.

This study highlights a critical dilemma for universities in non-Anglophone settings: how to benefit from English and enhance student competitiveness without limiting the quality of education and the learning of discipline knowledge. As more universities adopt EMI, it is important to understand the student voice, especially those who may be positioned on the periphery of the university due to their language proficiency. This study supports existing literature regarding language challenges in EMI settings and adds unique findings by exploring the student journey and experience of EMI. Recommendations are given to university curriculum developers and EAP practitioners to enhance the EMI experience.

**Key Words:** English medium university; first-year students; ethnography

**Word count:** 77,488

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## ABBREVIATIONS

CLIL	Content and language integrated learning
CMI	Chinese medium instruction
EAP	English for academic purposes
EMI	English medium instruction
ESP	English for specific purposes
HD	Higher diploma
HKDSE	Hong Kong diploma of secondary education
IELTS	International English language testing system
MOI	Medium of instruction

## TRANSCRIPTION KEY

...	pause or hesitation
[...]	omission of utterance
[word]	replacement of the word uttered by the participant to anonymise the data
(word)	non-verbal communication
-	crosstalk

## CHAPTER 1 *Introduction*

### 1.1 Research problem and context

#### 1.1.1 *The growth of English medium universities*

English medium instruction (EMI) is a growing phenomenon within the university sector in non-Anglophone settings (Galloway, Numajiri and Rees, 2020; Macaro, 2018; Rose, 2021). In a global study of 55 countries and jurisdictions, education and policy stakeholders reported that there was a widespread trend towards the adoption of EMI (Dearden, 2014). Around the globe, government policy makers have sought to introduce more EMI into higher education (Macaro, 2018). EMI has also caught the attention of high-level policy makers in the Asia-Pacific region due to the rising role of English as a lingua franca and the growth of the university sector (Galloway and Ruegg, 2020; Rose and Galloway, 2019; Walkinshaw, Fenton-Smith and Humphreys, 2017). According to Hu, Li and Lei (2014), governments see EMI as a key strategy to enhance knowledge, innovation and competitiveness. EMI is linked to the spread of English as an international language embedded into new flows of information, technology, and people (Macaro, 2018). Access to English has also become a priority for many students who are compelled to compete in this changing landscape. Rose (2021) therefore makes the point that EMI is not only top-down led but increasingly demanded by students. EMI has thus become both a macro strategic priority of governments, and a micro strategic choice of students. This has given rise to major implications and challenges at the university level.

Operating within a more pressured and competitive environment, many universities in non-Anglophone settings have endeavoured to implement EMI. The main drivers for adopting EMI include raising university profiles (Macaro, 2018; Macaro, et al., 2018), increasing global competitiveness (Healey, 2017), climbing the university rankings (Piller and Cho, 2013; Mok, 2001), increasing revenues (Wilkinson, 2013), enhancing research profiles and accessing knowledge (Galloway, Kriukow and Numajiri, 2017), engaging in internationalisation (Galloway, Numajiri and Rees, 2020; Walkinshaw, Fenton-Smith and Humphreys, 2017), enhancing the English language skills of students (Galloway, Kriukow and Numajiri, 2017), developing the employability prospects of students (Galloway, Kriukow and Numajiri, 2017), and offering home students a chance to engage in a globalised environment (Briggs, Dearden and Macaro, 2018). From these different angles, the overall promise of EMI for institutions and their students is to enable access, competitive edge and engagement in globalisation and the knowledge economy.

Despite the perceived benefits and justifications for EMI, implementation at the institutional level has been problematic. Walkinshaw, Fenton-Smith and Humphreys (2017, p.4), for example, suggest that implementation has “often been experimental”, which is probably due to the speed at which EMI adoption is occurring (Macaro, 2018). Rose and Galloway (2019, p.195) highlight that language use in EMI settings is “largely unexplored”. Thus, there are many unknowns regarding the effects of EMI on content knowledge, the impact of EMI on language proficiency, and the most appropriate type of English practices promoted in EMI institutions. It has also been pointed out that EMI can increase social inequalities and reduce access to higher education (Deaden and Macaro, 2016; Galloway, Kriukow, Numajiri, 2017; Hu, Li and Lei, 2014). Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who have not had adequate access to English may, for example, be unable to access university education, or if admitted, struggle to cope in the new linguistic environment. The ideological reverberation of adopting EMI has also drawn attention. Some commentators have suggested that adherence to EMI is adherence to Western dominated practices and knowledge which limits local and national languages and forms of critical enquiry (Kirkpatrick, 2011; Phillipson, 2017). Though universities can gain from EMI practices, implementing EMI at the university level raises many practical and ideological challenges.

The provision of EMI at the university level, and how to traverse the many practical and ideological challenges highlighted above is increasingly becoming a research focus. However, the speed at which EMI is being adopted has outpaced research, and therefore more research is needed into EMI university contexts. It is still not clear how students can best benefit from the EMI experience and how universities can navigate the many challenges in providing quality EMI education. EMI research in some contexts is particularly underrepresented. Rose (2021) and Walkinshaw, Fenton-Smith and Humphreys (2017), for example, have noted a lack of EMI research in the Asia-Pacific region and Galloway, Numajiri and Rees (2020, p.397) suggest that “As a field of study, EMI is in a state of relative infancy outside Europe”. Within the growing research field of EMI, and in particular within the Asia-Pacific region, researchers have begun to identify major controversies with the teaching of content subjects in English. Relevant to this PhD study, and in need of further exploration, these controversies include:

- the linguistic challenges of EMI (e.g. Aizawa, Rose and Thompson, 2020; Evans and Morrison, 2011a, 2011b);
- the impact of previous language of instruction experience (e.g. Aizawa and Rose, 2020; Evans and Morrison, 2018);

- whether the teaching of content subjects in English enhances students' language proficiency (e.g. Galloway and Ruegg, 2020);
- whether students' content knowledge is enhanced through EMI (e.g. Beckett and Li, 2012; Hu, Li and Lei, 2014);
- the marginalisation, struggle and investment of students with less cultural capital (e.g. Sung, 2019; Teng, 2018);
- whether home students can engage in internationalisation (e.g. Gardner and Lau, 2019; Lauridsen, 2020);
- the ideological implications of EMI (e.g. Li, 2013) and the impact on local and international languages (e.g. Kirkpatrick, 2017).

Having identified some of the key drivers and issues within the growing EMI higher education context, the next section highlights the difficulties of defining EMI.

### *1.1.2 Defining EMI*

EMI has been defined in a number of ways, a commonly used definition of EMI however is:

The use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English. (Macaro, 2018, p.1)

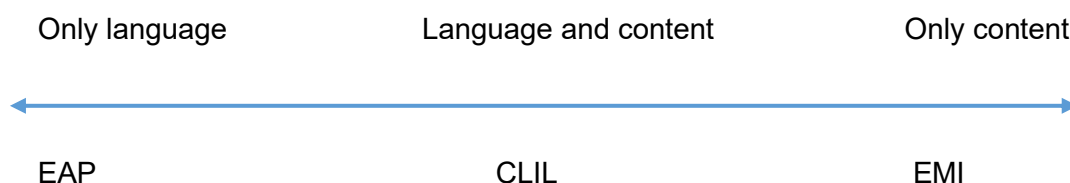
EMI is commonly seen to be focused on the teaching of content subjects through the medium of English, without an explicit focus by content lecturers on enhancing students' English. As Pecorari and Malmström (2018, p.497) put it, language learning is a "second-order" priority of EMI and is "frequently ignored or deprioritised".

EMI has been described as a "nuanced concept operating on a continua of usage" depending on the educational, course and classroom setting (Walkinshaw, Fenton-Smith and Humphreys, 2017, p.6). Macaro (2018) is the first to acknowledge that his definition of EMI above has its complications and needs to be problematised for different educational settings. The term 'teach' for example could mean to lecture, but it could also mean to facilitate class discussions, interact with students on a small group basis and conduct Q&A sessions. One study (Shepard and Morrison, 2021) in Hong Kong found that though instructors mostly lectured in English, they integrated translations into their teaching and offered explanations in English and Cantonese. Students negotiated the language of use when conducting classroom activities. This suggests that rather than an English only environment, language use is more dynamic and flexible in EMI settings.



EMI can be distinguished from other content and language approaches such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). As pointed out by Rose (2021), CLIL focusses on developing students' content knowledge and language skills with equal emphasis. Students taking subjects using a CLIL approach may not be expected to have the required language proficiency, as language enhancement is a learning outcome. This differs from EMI which makes no claims in definition to focus on language acquisition (Dearden and Macaro, 2016; Rose, 2021). In EMI contexts, content is the focus of learning with English being a “tool” for teaching (Airey, 2016, p.73). Thus, there is an expectation that students should possess the required language proficiency to be able to study in EMI settings, though academic language support is often provided in the form of EAP. EAP is a field of study which informs the instruction of academic literacies and communicative strategies needed by students in academic settings (Hyland and Shaw, 2016). In terms of first-year students in EMI institutions, EAP is often taught to help students acclimatise to the linguistic and academic conventions of the general academic community. The approaches outlined above can be represented using Airey's (2016) language/content continuum as shown below.

### *Learning outcomes*



### *Type of course*

*Figure 1: Airey's (2016) language/content continuum*

Defining the English in EMI has caused contention and has practical and ideological implications. Some research suggests that university students value adherence to first language varieties of standard English (e.g. standard American English), especially in teaching and exam contexts (Kuteeva, 2020; Inbar-Lourie and Donitsa-Schmidt's, 2020). However, some authors suggest that an expectation of 'standard' English is unrealistic and unreflective of how multilingual speakers use language (Smit, 2010), with students often placing too much pressure on themselves or being too critical of their lecturers' English (Jenkins and Mauranen, 2019). These latter authors advocate for more open attitudes towards

different varieties of English used in lingua franca interactions, and for more value to be placed on the accommodation strategies students and teachers use in these interactions. Other authors question whether the 'E' in EMI means English only and suggest that there should be more recognition of the fluid ways in which learners and teachers use their multilingual resources. Wei (2018), for example, argues that the use of different linguistic resources in the classroom to create meaning is a strength and not a weakness, and Sahan and Rose (2021, p.13) contend that EMI should be normalised as a "multilingual endeavour" which is not restricted to English. In terms of whether first languages could be used in EMI programmes, student responses have been varied. Some students welcome the use of first languages to aid content understanding, while others see EMI as a chance to develop their English skills and prefer English only policies (Rose and Galloway, 2019). Language ideology has a strong impact on how a person or institution values the type of English used, and whether it is acceptable to draw on multilingual resources in certain situations. In implementing EMI, universities have to consider a range of practical and ideological factors which affect its success in each unique context.

### *1.1.3 The first year at university*

The first year of university is a crucial phase for students' integration and success in the new learning community (Naylor, Baik and Arkoudis, 2018). This is especially the case for students in EMI settings who often use English as an additional or foreign language to engage in their studies. Research which has focused on the transition from high school to university has shown that there are many language challenges for these students (e.g. Aizawa and Rose, 2020; Evans and Morrison, 2011a, 2011b). The range of linguistic challenges for EMI students has been well documented in different university contexts (e.g. Hellekjær, 2010; Kamaşak, Sahan and Rose, 2021; Pessoa, Miller and Kaufer, 2014; Yung and Fong, 2019). Some studies have shown the impact of learner backgrounds on the transition to university. For example, the medium of instruction used at high school can affect the level of linguistic challenge for students (Aizawa and Rose, 2020; Evans and Morrison, 2018; Lin and Morrison, 2010). Students' previous access to the English language through the social, cultural and economic capital of their families can also impact the journey to university and their experience in the new educational environment (Yung, 2020; Sung, 2019). As students enter a new educational context, their capital is re-evaluated. This valuation of capital positions students and contributes to whether they will be considered as legitimate members of the new community (Darvin and Norton, 2016). In some cases, the valuation of students' capital in the new context can lead to a deficit positioning (Marshall, 2009). Subsequently, certain students

may find it difficult to integrate and survive in the EMI environment (Teng, 2019; Sung, 2019). As students journey across their first year at an EMI university, they have to contend with a multitude of factors and influences including the linguistic challenges, their language learning histories and their positioning within the new learning environment. These factors and influences affect students' investment in English and their language learning trajectories.

#### *1.1.4 English language proficiency*

The level of English proficiency needed to succeed in academic EMI environments and gain from the EMI experience is another area of contention. Students are expected to possess high enough proficiency levels to enable their study success before beginning EMI studies, however as Nguyen, Walkinshaw and Pham (2017) point out, many universities admit students with lower proficiency levels. Any perceived shortfall in proficiency is often accommodated through language support in the form of EAP provision, or in some cases remedial classes which, as Marshall (2009) pointed out, can position certain students as problem cases. As some students may not have the social and economic backgrounds which supported the development of their English capital, there is an egalitarian side to the debate about the required proficiency levels to be admitted to EMI universities. Higher ranked universities tend to have higher language proficiency requirements and therefore social class and access to English during childhood may affect a prospective student's chances of enrolling into their preferred university (McKinley, Rose and Zhou, 2021).

Research (e.g. Rose, et al., 2020a) has identified that students with an IELTS score of 6.5 and above experience fewer problems in their content subjects and received higher grades than those with lower proficiency levels. A similar picture is painted in other studies (Kamaşak, Sahan and Rose, 2021; Aizawa and Rose, 2019) which show that students reaching a certain threshold reported fewer language challenges in their EMI studies. However, Rose, et al.'s (2020a) lower proficiency participants were able to pass their subjects and found many benefits to studying in English, including the enhancement of their career prospects. This suggests that though lower proficiency students struggle, they gain in other ways from the EMI experience.

There is a danger, however, that neither content learning nor English gains are accomplished in university EMI contexts (Chapple, 2015; Lei and Hu, 2014). Lower proficiency students therefore need to be supported with appropriate and targeted language enhancement activities to help them engage in the new academic environment and succeed in their studies.

### *1.1.5 The Hong Kong context*

Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China and has over seven million residents. According to government statistics, 88.9% of these residents use Cantonese as their first language, 1.9% use Putonghua, 3.1% use other Chinese dialects, 4% use English, and 1.9% use other first languages (Census and Statistics Department, 2016). In the 2016 by-census, 48.9% of Hong Kong residents claimed that they used English as an additional language, this percentage had risen from 34.9% in 1996 (Census and Statistics Department, 1996; 2016). According to Article 9 of the Basic Law, Chinese is the official language of the executive authorities, legislature and judiciary in Hong Kong, with English also permitted for use as an official language (Basic Law, 1990).

English in Hong Kong has a long history, and due to its high status since colonial times, and perceived instrumental value in globalising contexts, has become the site of much contention, competition and anguish. Under colonial rule, English performed a gatekeeping role for the attainment of highly sought government and professional jobs (Evans, 2013). English use was restricted to the upper levels of society and was largely unattainable for the vast majority. However, during the 1980s, Hong Kong's development as a financial, retail, tourism and logistics hub increased demand for English (Li, 2009). English changed from being a colonial language to an international language (Poon, 2010). Poon (2004) notes that people in Hong Kong saw a greater need to learn English and English became parents' preferred medium of instruction of schooling.

There is much contention regarding the most appropriate medium of instruction in Hong Kong education (discussed in more detail in Chapter 2). Researchers have suggested that Cantonese instruction offers a higher quality of education than English instruction, with more interaction and cognitive depth (Evans, 2013; Ng, 2007; Poon, 2004). However, parental demand for English has been strong due to the perceived advantages for attaining a university place and professional employment (Evans, 2013; Evans and Morrison, 2017; Poon, 2004). Language policy makers have tried to appease the different camps through a string of language policies. Laissez-faire policies have tended to result in more schools embracing English, but have created difficulties for teachers and students in terms of academic achievement and pedagogy (Lin, 1996; Poon, 2013). Streaming and Chinese medium policies have created tension for only allowing an elite select of students to be schooled in English and for limiting exposure to English for CMI students (Evans, 2013; Poon, 2004). Social class is an integral part of these debates as more affluent families can support their children's English and provide out of school English opportunities (Li, 2009). Li (2009) also notes that the typological differences between Cantonese and English have exacerbated the challenges for

students in reaching high proficiency levels. It can be summed up that during the past decades, demand for English has been high from all sectors of society which has created divisions and inequalities.

Demand for higher education in Hong Kong is strong (Li, 2009) and the percentage of the population with a higher qualification has risen from 9.1% in 1986 to 32.7% in 2016 (Census and Statistics Department, 1996; 2016). Hong Kong has 22 higher education institutions, eight of which are funded through the University Grants Committee (Education Bureau, 2021). The remaining 14 institutions are either publically funded specialised institutions or private enterprises offering associate degree programmes. For most of these institutions, English is the official medium of instruction, and this has placed pressure on students, especially those who have conducted most of their schooling in Cantonese. Research (e.g. Evans and Morrison, 2011a; 2011b; 2017; 2018) has shown that for certain students, adapting to the linguistic demands of EMI university holds considerable challenges. Due to its status as an international and academic language, the use of EMI at universities is unlikely to change (Evans, 2009). This adds downward pressure to secondary school students who need to contend with English to secure a place at university.

The Hong Kong context has been described as a “crucible” of EMI study (Macaro, 2018, p.35). Though Hong Kong has experienced a unique journey in its EMI endeavours, studies in this context have resonated with researchers across different settings. The first year EMI experience at university is a particularly crucial phase, and lower proficiency learners especially have to contend with the linguistic and affective challenges of this new setting. As EMI university contexts grow in number, and the controversies about the most effective ways to implement EMI continue, an in-depth study into the EMI experiences of first-year students can add value to the literature.

## 1.2 Research objectives and research questions

This study is an in-depth investigation into the EMI journeys of 10 first-year undergraduates at a university in Hong Kong. The study focusses on local Hong Kong students who were admitted into the university with the general minimum English proficiency requirement of HKDSE Level 3 (equivalent to IELTS Level 5.48-5.68, determined as ‘modest users’, HKEAA, 2013). The aim of the study is to learn how the focal students experienced and viewed English across their first year. In more specific terms, the study aims to examine the students’ positioning with English, their language learning desires, and the language ideologies they hold in their pursuit of English. I am especially interested in how these positionings, desires

and ideologies change over the first year, and the impact on the students' investment in English (the concepts of positionality, desire, investment and language ideology are discussed in Chapter 2).

The impetus for the study focus came from the need to better understand how students transition into EMI studies at university. Macaro, et al. (2018) have called for more studies which focus on this transition. As an EAP instructor, I have reflected that students similar to the focal students often hold complex relationships with English and find it difficult to engage in their studies. This is similar to what Li (2018, p.4) describes as an “unease” and “discomfort” with English. Going beyond language challenges that students encounter across year 1, there is a need to understand the deeper layers of what factors cause a student to invest in, or disinvest from English, subsequently affecting their study success and integration into the university. English from this perspective is seen not only as a linguistic system but also a form of social practice (Norton, 2016). In examining the interacting and changing positioning, desires and ideologies of students, I am taking a critical approach which aims to identify the underlying experiences, processes and conditions that facilitate and constrain connection to English and the communities of its use. This study focus can ultimately contribute to the provision of facilitative and equitable models of EMI for learners who struggle linguistically and affectively with English.

This study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the discursive positionings, desires and language ideologies of students with lower English proficiency levels during their first year at an English medium instruction (EMI) university in Hong Kong?
2. How do these positionings, desires and language ideologies change over the first year of study?
3. What tensions do students experience with English during their first year? And how do these tensions affect their investment in English and their learning trajectories?

### 1.3 Theoretical underpinnings

This study takes poststructuralism as the basis for investigation. According to McNamara (2012), poststructuralism is a critical perspective which deals with questions of justice. It questions “stable truths” (p.477), structures, ideologies and fixed social categories and focuses on the interconnected nature of different processes and systems. Rather than being centred within the boundaries of fixed structures and social categories, power is seen by poststructuralists as flowing between these fluid structures and social categories through the discourses (systems of power and knowledge) that they use. Ideology and desires are located within these discourses where power is perpetuated by social actors. The focus of analysis of poststructuralism centres on the underlying meanings of these discourses and how they manifest into social inclusion and exclusion. Researchers using a poststructuralist paradigm are interested in the dynamic interplay between different systems and processes with valid knowledge considered as context sensitive and dialogical (Morgan, 2007).

The poststructuralist perspective does not view language as a speaker-independent set of fixed norms, but rather a situated meaning-making practice in which discourses flow to position speakers into social roles and classifications (Norton and Toohey, 2011). Bourdieu (1991, p.38) wrote that “grammar defines meaning only very partially” and it is in the social relationships between speakers that meaning is encoded and decoded, and a person’s legitimacy is ascribed. The power that a speaker has is related to the capital they hold (i.e., their social, cultural and economic capital) which determines their social positioning. Language learning through this lens can be viewed not only as the learning of a fixed set of language rules, but “as a process of struggling to use language in order to participate in specific speech communities” (Norton and Toohey, 2011, p.416). In their interactions, language learners position themselves and are positioned by others which determines the power and legitimacy they are awarded. In the EMI university context, for example, students must learn academic register to enable their participation, recognition and success. Through the use of academic register, they are better able to align themselves with the communicative norms of the academic community and stake their position. EAP not only teaches the surface rules of academic register (e.g. academic style; referencing conventions) but also the underlying discourses that will enable students to participate in the academic community. These discourses are based in flows of power and knowledge, for example, Western approaches to knowledge construction or standard varieties of English. In seeking to establish themselves in EMI contexts, English learners not only need to contend with the linguistic struggle of English, but also the underlying discourses to which success is embedded.

Poststructuralists see identity as complex, dynamic, and a site of change. Identity is “no longer stable or permanent [...] but moving and conflicting” (Kramsch, 2012 p.484). Identity is layered into the social and historical contexts of individuals who perform multiple identities across different online and offline sites (Darvin and Norton (2016). This includes language learners as language learning is “an experience of identity” (Kramsch, 2012, p.488). As well as the layering and performing of identities, individuals desire and struggle to assume new identity positions and participate in new communities (Norton and Toohey, 2011). This suggests that as individuals negotiate their developing identities, there is room for acts of agency. Agency is defined as “the capacity of people to act on behalf of what matters to them” (Huff-Sisson, 2016, p.672). Poststructuralists thus suggest that through critical pedagogies, language learners can develop the awareness to question, subscribe or resist the ideologies, discourses and positionings which influence their learning trajectories and access to new communities (e.g. Flores, 2013; Kubota, 2011; Motha and Lin, 2014).

## 1.4 Methodology

This study is an in-depth investigation into the unfolding experiences of the participants and the impact on their positionality, language desires and ideologies. The study takes the view that individuals discursively construct their social worlds within an interacting ecosystem of processes and conditions. An individual’s emerging dispositions, trajectories and identities are facilitated and constrained by these processes and conditions. The study explores the complexity of processes and conditions at play across the participants’ first year at an EMI university to identify salient patterns within the data. The study takes an in-depth and situated approach, and it is envisioned that the results will resonate with EMI researchers and practitioners in different teaching contexts.

This study takes a qualitative approach and sees participants as co-constructors of knowledge. Through engagement and dialogue, the research process is aimed to benefit the participants by enabling a reflexive approach. This study takes a critical ethnographic sociolinguistic methodology (Heller, Pietikainen and Pujolar, 2018) which aims to take an in-depth and situated approach in addressing issues of power and access to English. To build a comprehensive picture, I used a range of data collection methods which included the students’ written reflections, qualitative interviews, and field notes. These methods were employed during three phases over the students’ first year at university. To facilitate ongoing contact, I set up weekly English mentoring sessions which were attended by the participants. These meetings helped to informally develop rapport and create spaces for sharing experiences and insights. Data analysis was conducted throughout the ethnographic process so that each data collection



stage informed the next. I also provided the students with summaries of interviews and opportunities to discuss findings as the study progressed which aided the circulation of ideas and the reliability of findings.

### 1.5 Justification for the study

This study is positioned within a growing field of study which focuses on EMI in university contexts. As mentioned above, these contexts are growing in number and scope, yet there is much to be learned about how to practically and equitably implement EMI.

Within the field of EMI, this study focuses on the first year experience. The first year is a crucial phase for students in their integration into university (Naylor, Baik and Arkoudis, 2018). The first year is one of many transitions for students (Marshall, 2009), including the transition from high school to university. According to Macaro, et al. (2018), who conducted a comprehensive review of EMI in universities, there is a distinct lack of research on the transition from secondary school to university. It is critical to know more about how students' previous learning experiences influence them at university and the impact of how they adapt to the demands of EMI throughout their first year. Useful research (e.g. Aizawa and Rose, 2020; Evans and Morrison, 2018) has pointed out the impact of past EMI experience on learners' progression at university. There is also a need to look at the complexity of other factors affecting the first year journey. For example, how learners' access to English, the pedagogy of their schooling, and their positionality with English affect their progression at university.

Across the first year, there is also a need to look at how students' reflections of the EMI experience change and develop. Longitudinal studies are rare within this field of research. Most notably, Evans and Morrison (2011b) conducted a study across year 1 with the main focus being on language challenges. Longitudinal studies looking beyond language challenges are uncommon and thus research focusing on the wider student experiences of EMI is needed. Sung (2019), for example, takes an in-depth approach into the contextual factors, desires and investments impacting one university student in Hong Kong, however, this participant was in the latter years of his university career.

Some recent research has produced useful data on attitudes and motivational factors within EMI university contexts. Of prominence, the work of Galloway, Numajiri and Rees (2020) and Doiz and Lasagabaster (2018) have moved the research agenda forward. The research instruments used in these studies, however, tend to be one-off focus groups or interviews, or rely on quantitative methods. To gain deeper insights into the developing attitudes and

motivations for engaging in EMI, studies adopting ethnographic approaches can add to the existing literature.

Within studies on the first year experience, there is a lack of research exclusively tracking students admitted with the minimally required English level, or those with lower than institutional average English language level. These learners are often readily enrolled (Nguyen, Walkinshaw and Pham, 2017) but are particularly in need of support. It is important to understand the needs and reflections of these students to ensure that EMI is useful and equitable. Macaro (2018) highlighted that EMI is often a cost-benefit decision, for example, some students may struggle with content knowledge but gain in having more exposure to English. In one study, Rose, et al. (2020a) made the point that although the lower proficiency students' GPA was reduced, they gained in other ways, for example through perceived better career prospects. EMI likely holds tension for these students who may be held back by their proficiency levels but wish to gain from EMI. There is currently a gap in the literature focusing on lower proficiency students and their understanding of the costs and benefits of studying through EMI. This PhD study aims to contribute towards forwarding awareness within this research gap.

## 1.6 Outline of the study

This thesis consists of a literature review, a methodology chapter, three chapters featuring the results, and finally a discussion and conclusion chapter. In Chapter 1 (i.e. this introductory chapter), I have highlighted that there are many problems in implementing EMI in non-Anglophone university settings. I also have set out the research objectives and research questions, and I justified how the study contributes to a gap in knowledge, especially regarding in-depth studies of lower proficiency learners.

In Chapter 2, I outline the theoretical orientations of the study and review important EMI studies. Chapter 2 starts by looking at the impact of contextual factors, and features the concepts of timescales, pivotal moments, trajectory and positionality. I also report and discuss influential contextual factors in the Hong Kong context. Chapter 2 then introduces the concept of possible selves in language learning and how learners may have specific desires and images of their future selves using English in particular communities. In Chapter 2, there is also a focus on investment in language learning, and especially Darwin and Norton's (2015, 2016) model of investment. This leads to a discussion on the ideology of neoliberalism. Finally, I discuss EMI issues in more detail and report studies from the student perspective.

In Chapter 3, I detail the research methodology and research design. This chapter starts with the methodological orientations and approach to knowledge before outlining the specific methods used in the collection of data. These methods include the collection of student reflective accounts, qualitative interviews and field notes. I also describe the incorporation of weekly mentoring sessions with the participants into the research design. I then describe the research context and research participants. The final parts of Chapter 3 outline the data analysis methods and discuss researcher positionality and ethical issues.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 report the results. As the data were collected in three phases over the academic year, each chapter focusses on one phase (i.e., the start, middle and end of year 1). Chapter 4, reporting the data collected at the beginning of the academic year, mainly concerns the language learning histories of the participants and their hopes for university. Chapter 5 focusses on the participants' reflections of their first semester. Chapter 6 reports the participants' reflections at the end of the academic year. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis and therefore each of the results chapters reports the main themes to arise from the research. Each of the results chapters finishes by looking at the connections between the themes and features a table which summarises the main themes with illustrative quotes.

Chapter 7 discusses the key findings of the research and concludes the study. In this chapter, I review the study objectives and answer the research questions. I then discuss important findings and position them within existing research. The chapter continues by offering recommendations to enhance EMI provision and I highlight the contribution of the study to existing research. The concluding parts focus on the limitations of the study and future directions for the research.

## CHAPTER 2 *Theoretical orientations and literature review*

### 2.1 Chapter overview

This study views language learning as a situated practice in which positioning, desires, and ideologies influence the investment and trajectories of learners. This chapter will present relevant frameworks for studying these influences and report on recent studies which approach language learning as a situated practice. This will include a focus on contextual approaches and positionality within language learning, possible selves and desire frameworks, and investment in language learning. The chapter will go on to focus on neoliberalism, the promise of English for social mobility, and the inequalities that this perpetuates. In the final part of this review, I will focus on EMI universities and especially report on student motivations and challenges within these growing contexts. This final section will draw on empirical studies conducted in university EMI settings that focus on the student perspective. Overall, the literature review will show that English holds many promises for learners, but it is also a contested site and a source of tension and struggle.

### 2.2 Contextual approaches and positionality in language learning

#### 2.2.1 Introduction

When entering a new learning context, learners bring a network of past experiences and resources which inform their positioning, attitudes, and investment in the new environment. This section focusses on theoretical approaches which aim to explore how learners are embedded into the different social contexts which constrain or enable their language learning. The first part outlines contextual views of language learning, the concept of timescales and trajectories, pivotal acts, and positioning. Example studies are outlined to show how these theoretical approaches can inform research. The second part of this section on context and positionality focusses on salient contextual factors which have informed the research agenda, particularly in the Hong Kong context. These contextual factors include the personal costs of English, the status of English, and the medium of instruction at secondary school.

### 2.2.2 Contextual views of language learning

Contextual views of language learning recognise that social contexts can facilitate and restrain access to languages and language communities. Learners are embedded into their social contexts and through the language learning journey, these social contexts mediate the attitudes and language identity formations of learners (Pfenninger and Singleton, 2016). This interaction and mediation often occurs in uneven and contradictory ways across social contexts and time (Norton and Toohey, 2011). Language learning through this lens moves the research agenda away from viewing language learning solely as an individual cognitive process, to a process that is embedded and negotiated within social contexts.

Contexts are difficult to define (Ushioda, 2013) and could refer to family contexts, classroom contexts, institutional contexts, education systems and societal contexts. Pfenninger and Singleton (2016), for example, explored micro-contextual influencers and showed that quality day-to-day experiences in the classroom, including peer relations, were important in facilitating engagement with English, with the wider school context also influencing learners' attitudes and identities. Though some researchers advocate viewing learners within complex-dynamic systems (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008) and exploring the complexity of dynamics which learners engage within, others like Ushioda (2013) suggest that language researchers inevitably need to simplify and define specific contexts for the practical purposes of carrying out research. Exploring personal histories can serve as one way to understand which contextual factors hold meaning for participants (Huff Sisson, 2016). Some researchers (e.g. Sung, 2019; Yung, 2020) have explored the language learning histories of their participants as part of qualitative research designs which aim to understand learners' identity formations and motivations.

Ushioda's (2009) *person-in-context relational view of motivation, self and identity* is one attempt to bring context deeper into the language research agenda. The person-in-context relational view provides a useful lens to see students as people integrated into dynamic contexts. Ushioda (2009) argues that context cannot be seen as an external variable when researching language learners. Instead, language researchers should take a more holistic approach which sees a person's context as an integrated part of their learning experience and identity. Ushioda (2009) suggests that we view each language learner as a "thinking, feeling human being, with an identity, a personality, a unique history and background, a person with goals, motives and intentions" (p.220). She advocates that language researchers see each learner as a "reflective intentional agent" embedded into different systems and social relations (p.220). Taking a person-in-context relational view helps to understand how learners' current language learning experiences and 'self-states' may "facilitate or constrain their engagement

with future possible selves” (Ushioda, 2009). A contextual view therefore investigates the systems and processes that learners coexist with and navigate in their language learning endeavours.

### *2.2.3 Example studies that explored the impact of contextual factors on language learners*

Studies that have viewed contextual factors as integrated into the language learning journey and not as static background descriptors of language learners have tended to use qualitative methods. Lamb (2013) took a qualitative approach in his study of 10 motivated but low-achieving English learners in rural Indonesia. The study revealed the social and economic constraints on the learners as they tried to compete with their urban counterparts. Through interviews with the learners’ parents, Lamb showed that although these rural parents wanted their children to study English, they were unable to articulate how English would be useful for their children’s future. In comparison, Lamb interviewed urban parents who had very specific visions of how their children could benefit from English. In this study, Lamb showed the constraints the learners faced on their English learning journeys despite being identified as motivated students. Contextual factors such as limited exposure to English in the community and at school, a lack of parental support and role models, and financial position caused disadvantages which led to the lack of a clear future vision with English.

Learners can develop the skills to critically assess the contextual influences on their language learning journey so that they can assert more control. Darwin and Norton (2016, pp.27-28), for instance, argue that language learners can “identify and navigate systemic patterns of control”. In a study based in Hong Kong, Yung (2020) shows how one learner strived to overcome contextual constraints to enhance her learner agency and access new opportunities. Yung’s participant, Diana, 18, came from a low-income single-parent family and had low self-esteem regarding her English which she attributed to a lack of opportunity. This lack of opportunity included minimal access to English at home, to resources, and reduced exposure to English during her Chinese medium schooling. Diana commonly compared herself to more fluent peers and this fuelled her determination to invest in English. Desperate to obtain a university place, and avoid discrimination and low-income work, Diana used her family connections to pool resources to pay for a tutorial school. This financial investment in English was an attempt to increase her social network with well-off counterparts and enhance her English linguistic capital. The study showed the impact of contextual factors on the learner, and her struggle to access English resources to enable social mobility.

#### *2.2.4 Timescales and language learning trajectories*

Another way to view context is through the concept of 'timescales'. Timescales are interconnected processes that develop on micro, meso and macro levels. Using the lens of timescales can help to avoid seeing contextual factors as static background effects. According to Lemke (2000, p.275), human activity is conducted on an "ecosocial system of interdependent processes", or timescales. Examples of timescales include an interaction, a classroom activity, a course, a degree, an education system, colonialism, or globalisation. Each of these timescales has its own trajectory and development through time but is also typical of its type (Lemke, 2000). For example, the education system in Britain has similarities with that of Hong Kong, but also differs. Individuals move through these interacting timescales and have unique blends and interpretations of experiences which contribute to their emerging trajectories and identities. When students enter a classroom, they bring a network of "ideas, objects and dispositions" from various timescales (Wortham and Rhodes, 2013, p.541) as well as "past experiences and projections about the future that are not enclosed by classroom walls" (Sampson, 2019, p.15). These heterogeneous resources are combined in unique ways to shape each student's experience in the class, and in time contribute to the student's emerging trajectories and identities. These interacting timescales not only influence student motivation (de Bot, 2014), but also language ideology and investment in English.

Wortham and Rhodes's (2012, p.84) suggest that trajectories "describe how sociocultural regularities have variable extents". In other words, though social conditions may determine life courses, negotiation or improvisation within these spaces can redirect an individual's opportunities. In reimagining the macro-micro dichotomy, Wortham and Rhodes do not ignore the impact of larger structures on individuals' decisions and prospects but suggest that there is a more complex picture which can more accurately discern the configuration of dispositions and identifications people develop. Sociocultural regularities do not refer to universal structures but to signs and resources that move across time and space. Exploring this network of processes is essential for understanding students' emerging positionality and trajectories.

#### *2.2.5 Pivotal acts and critical incidents*

As individuals journey through different timescales, their emerging positionalities and identities form and sediment. When similar events and experiences occur, a focal identity becomes established. However, occasionally a "pivotal act" can occur which results in an individual reassessing a certain positionality or identity (Wortham and Rhodes, 2013, p.551). Pivotal acts are interactions or experiences which force or provide an opportunity for an individual to

reassess a position or course of action. An example comes from Huff Sisson's (2016) study of an African-American public pre-school teacher in the United States. Huff Sisson's participant was marginalised at school due to her racial and cultural heritage and was unable to bond with her teachers and succeed academically. This resulted in her accepting a positioning as a low-achieving student. Later, through an encounter with a community college lecturer, she was able to question her positioning as a low-achieving student and re-author an alternative positioning. This unexpected encounter proved to be a 'critical incident' which resulted in the participant initiating "acts of agency" and finishing her studies and going on to earn Bachelor and Master degrees (Huff Sisson, p. 679). Norton and Toohey (2011) highlight that some identity positions limit the possibilities of the learner, while others offer new sets of possibilities. Pivotal acts or critical incidents can challenge learners to reassess their positioning and plot new directions in their trajectories.

#### *2.2.6 Positioning with English in the learning context*

Poststructuralist perspectives see language learning as a struggle to access new communities and take on new identity positions (Norton and Toohey, 2011). When individuals interact, they assign different 'positions' to themselves and others which validate or marginalise their access to, and place in, certain communities. For example, interlocutors may position others based on their accent and assign them a more, or less, positive status (Beinhoff, 2013). 'Positions' are "patterns of beliefs" about roles that are unevenly distributed by different communities, stakeholders and institutions (Harré, 2015, p.2). These patterns of beliefs are infused with the ideologies of these different communities, stakeholders and institutions and therefore power that is circulated legitimises or marginalises social actors and their pursuits. Positions are also described as "clusters of rights and duties" which are "embedded into a complex network of norms and conventions" when enacting different roles (Harré, 2015, p.5; 2). Hence, when a person is positioned, they are expected to enact particular social roles or perform in a way that is consistent with a particular social identification. In this study, I see these subject positions as part of the intricate and emerging layers of identity, and positioning as the way in which individuals and other stakeholders assign roles, rights, social identifications, and responsibilities to themselves or others. Individuals are not merely products of these assigned positionings. Drawing on the work of Holland, et al. (1998), Huff Sisson (2016) suggests that individuals can improvise their positioning to claim new identity configurations.

According to De Costa (2011, p.350), language researchers can use the lens of positioning to "examine how micro and macro political factors shape learner beliefs over an extended period of time". Like Wortham and Rhodes (2013), I am not only looking at how the participants



position themselves in speech events but also how other timescales and stakeholders (e.g. the education system, the university) position the participants. An example of how this can be conducted comes from a study by Marshall (2009), outlined below.

### *2.2.7 Example study on student positionality*

In his study of multilingual first-year university students in Canada, Marshall (2009) observed how the participants were marginalised by a deficit positioning from the university. The participants were placed into a remedial ESL course which focused on academic language skills. Marshall detailed how the participants felt embarrassed to take the additional subject because they felt like failures, despite the barriers they had overcome to claim a university place, and their multilingual repertoires. Marshall concluded that the social stigma associated with 're-becoming ESL', an identity position the participants had hoped to leave behind, hindered their legitimacy in the new learning environment. Marshall concluded that the participants had been positioned as "problems to be fixed" (p.42) rather than in a positive light. As Marshall suggests, positioning relates to what institutions/society expects and allows individuals to be like. In positioning the multilingual students through a deficit lens, their multilingual repertoires were delegitimised and not seen as assets or cultural capital. The study is useful in showing the challenges of meeting the language needs of first-year students without positioning them through a deficit lens. This is relevant to EMI settings that admit lower proficiency English users. Marshall advocates for more open classroom practices which can lead to a separation of past positionings to transform how learners view themselves.

### *2.2.8 The personal costs of English*

The reminder of Section 2.2 will focus on particular contextual factors relevant to Hong Kong and this focal study. As mentioned in Marshall's study above, when his students began university, they had identity positions with English that they wanted to leave behind. This suggests that contextual factors and positioning have an impact on students when they enter a new learning context. Of relevance to this study are the language learning histories of the participants and the impact on their university studies; and many students in Hong Kong have experienced stress and pressure in their language learning journeys at school. Evans and Morrison (2017) note that access to EMI universities puts pressure on school pupils to choose EMI secondary schools. This has created fierce competition and stress for pupils and parents. In Hong Kong, during primary school, pupils take high-stakes tests which award them a

banding from Band One to Band Three (Lee and Chui, 2017). Higher performing pupils receive a higher banding and have a higher chance to enrol in an EMI secondary school. In addition to the stigmatisation of being labelled a Band Two or Three student at such an early age, stigmatisation is associated with students graduating from Chinese medium schools, because English medium schools are for the most part seen to enrol more academically able pupils. As Li (2009, p.79) puts it "Many have to cope really hard to overcome the psychological barrier of being socially labelled 'second best'". This labelling can have an impact at university on the confidence and self-efficacy levels of students. For example, a large-scale study of first-year students in Hong Kong found that those schooled in English had higher levels of confidence in their language skills and generally adapted better to university (Evans and Morrison, 2018). Extreme competition and psychological stress have also been documented in other Asian contexts. Piller and Cho (2013), for example, describe the personal costs of English for students who need to spend hours from a young age practising for high-stakes exams to compete for places at prestigious universities. Also, in the Korean context, Byean (2015) gives a personal account of the suffering incurred by these high-stakes exams which she sees as serving to stratify students and maintain class-based inequalities. With the expansion of EMI university contexts in Asia, Kirkpatrick (2014) predicts that there will be increasing pressure on primary and secondary schools to use English, and hence cause further stratification and pressure. This paragraph has served to show that first-year university students may have experienced trauma related to their English journeys which could impact their positionality at university.

### *2.2.9 The status of English in Hong Kong*

English has high status in Hong Kong which stems from its usage by the Hong Kong elite during colonial times as a language of government, the legal system and judiciary (Poon, 2004). During this time, English was seen as a colonial language and detached from most of the local population (Poon, 2013). English was largely unattainable for most people with only an elite few with the English skills to attain government and administrative positions. In the 1980s, the role of English became more important in trade and commerce (Li, 2009; Poon, 2004) further heightening its status to an international language (Poon, 2010). Since the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, English has continued to be a valued form of linguistic capital and an expectation of employers (Li, 2018). English has also continued to hold high status within education and has become "a marker for success and excellence" (Choi, 2010, p. 238). Within higher education, Choi (2010) argues that the discourse of instrumentalism has prevailed in debates about the use of English, with the main concern being placed on

competitiveness at the individual and city levels. With high prestige and perceived instrumental value, access to English has been competitive, and with one of the world's widest wealth gaps, pupils at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum have struggled to develop the necessary English capital (Li, 2018). English in Hong Kong has therefore become a finite resource and access to English capital is dependent on contextual factors such as social class and social networks. High English proficiency can index other social positionings such as education levels, class and family wealth. Through its journey from colonial to international status, English has continued to signify success and influence.

#### *2.2.10 Language policies in Hong Kong*

Related to the high status of English in Hong Kong is the status gained from medium of instruction at secondary school. In Hong Kong, the medium of instruction at primary school is Cantonese, however, some pupils can study in English at junior and senior secondary school. Medium of instruction has been a contentious issue in Hong Kong and policy makers have needed to balance access to English with the quality of education. Quality education is seen to be more accomplished in Cantonese because exposure to English for students is limited (Li, 2009) and teachers lack the linguistic resources to teach successfully in English (Lin, 1996). In Hong Kong, EMI schooling was traditionally limited to the elite and was more successfully implemented because these families had the social, cultural and economic capital to support their children (Lin, 1996). However, when universal secondary education was introduced in the 1970s, families from lower socio-economic backgrounds also demanded EMI schooling because of the perceived social mobility benefits (Poon, 2004). These families did not have the means or linguistic capital to support their children's studies in English (Li, 2009) and therefore EMI education was not always effective. The widely reported impact of the spread of English medium schooling into mass education domains was that of rote learning, code-switching and code-mixing (Lin, 1996). Due to the low English language ability of students, teachers began using techniques such as reading aloud and dictations. Under a demanding exam-oriented system, this was all teachers could reportedly do to prepare students and this led to reduced interaction and student engagement (Evans, 2008).

On the cusp of the handover of Hong Kong to China, the Hong Kong government issued a Chinese medium policy in which secondary schools would need to teach in Chinese. Despite the policy authors' arguments for the better quality of education through mother-tongue teaching, the eventual retention of an elite stream of EMI schools meant that the policy was regarded as inequitable and unfair (Choi, 2003). According to Li (2017), there was an embittered response to the policy by parents. One reason for the resentment was that children

attending the newly categorised CMI schools would be labelled as substandard to those children attending EMI schools, a label which would follow them through life. Parental fears about CMI school graduates' reduced life chances were evidenced in an influential 2009 study by Tsang (as cited in Evans, 2013). This study, which sampled approximately 15,000 pupils, concluded that EMI students were twice as likely to enter university as CMI students. In 2009, the government revealed a 'fine-tuning policy' which sought to address the concerns of various stakeholders and better address the needs of students (Education Bureau, 2010). The new policy aimed to reduce the CMI / EMI labels by giving schools greater flexibility to teach in Cantonese or English, depending on the subject and ability of students. This new flexible MOI arrangement (while maintaining the ethos of mother-tongue education) would better enable students who had previously learnt through Cantonese to gain more exposure to English (Education Bureau, 2010). The fine-tuning policy, which is still implemented today, has, according to Poon (2013), caused less controversy than the Chinese MOI policy. However, some studies (e.g. Chan, 2014) suggest the re-emergence of issues such as rote-learning and teacher-led classes.

The participants of this PhD study are recipients of the fine-tuning policy. Though EMI / CMI distinctions are more blurred after the policy, my students at the university continue to label themselves as EMI or CMI. The paragraphs above serve to show that the focal students of this study are embedded into a context in which English has high status, and competition to access English is fierce. Language policy has had a direct influence on the English trajectories of school pupils as the government has tried to balance fairness of access to English with pedagogic pragmatism. Below is a simplified summary of key MOI policies in Hong Kong.

*Table 1: Overview of key medium-of-instruction policies in Hong Kong*

<i>Date</i>	<i>Policy</i>	<i>Scope</i>	<i>% of CMI schools (Poon, 2004)</i>
1974	Laissez-faire policy	Schools given freedom to choose the MOI depending on the needs of students	12%
1994	Streaming policy	Schools streamed into CMI, two-medium, and EMI	34%
1997	Chinese medium policy	CMI required for the majority of schools	70%

2008	Fine-tuning policy	Diversified arrangements of MOI depending on the needs of students; removal of EMI / CMI terms	-
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### *2.2.11 Section summary*

This section has highlighted that learners operate within different timescales which constrain and facilitate their language learning journeys. Through these interacting timescales, learners develop positions in relation to English which are linked to the power they can employ with the language. Within the intricate network of timescales, learners can experience critical moments which lead them to question and improvise certain positions, potentially redirecting their language journey trajectories. Within Hong Kong, English has received high status but access to English is uneven. English medium instruction and changes in language policy have especially caused controversy in Hong Kong. This section has highlighted that language learning histories impact learners' positionality and relationships with English, the following section looks forward and discusses future selves and desire in language learning.

## **2.3 Future selves and desire in language learning**

### *2.3.1 Introduction*

Within the fields of second language acquisition and applied linguistics, the concepts of 'possible selves' and 'desire' have been important in theorising why learners invest their time and effort in learning languages. These concepts are important because when learners engage in language learning, they are engaging in an enhanced possible future with new identity formations and participation in target communities. This section will outline the concepts of 'possible selves' and the L2 motivational self system, it will then focus on desire in language learning and the desire framework developed by Motha and Lin (2014).

### *2.3.2 Possible selves*

When individuals learn languages, they are engaging in new possibilities of the self. Possible selves refer to the hopes and desires learners have for enhanced identities and participation in new communities which fuels their investment in the language (Norton and Toohey, 2011).

University students may, for example, desire to engage with international students to enhance their identity of being a globally networked individual. Possible selves are seen by some authors to be continuously re-scoped and influenced by contextual factors. Henry (2014) places the possible selves theory into a complex dynamic systems paradigm suggesting that motivational dynamics are embedded into other processes and operate on different timescales. These timescales could be, for example, an activity, a course or a university degree. According to Henry, learners re-scope their ideal L2 selves upwards or downwards depending on their assessment of how far, close or achievable the ideal is. Citing Lockwood and Kunda (1997), Henry suggest that this re-evaluation could be based on interaction with peers who give more realism to the potential self. I have noted this with my first-year students who often use older peers as reference points for their own development. Teaching approach and accessibility to the target language may also influence revisions in the ideal L2 self (Dörnyei, and Chan, 2013; Henry, 2014). This ongoing modification on short timescales can build up to affect longer timescales and ultimately affect a learner's trajectory.

An influential model inspired by possible selves theory is Dörnyei's (2009) L2 motivational self system. This theory suggests that there is a discrepancy between our current selves and our future target selves. Dörnyei's theory proposes that language learners hold images of an 'ideal L2 self', which is what they want their second language self to be like (e.g. a confident business communicator or an international traveller). Strong images of a future self are asserted to correlate with high motivation (Dörnyei and Chan, 2013). The strand of 'ought to' self represents obligations and expectations projected onto learners, and the actual L2 learning experience is impacted by the learning situation, teachers, peers and curriculum. The gap between the current L2 self and the ideal L2 self is what is proposed to form motivation and ultimately self-regulated learning behaviours (You and Dörnyei, 2016).

The L2 motivational self system has received considerable research attention and according to one meta-study, can serve as useful predictor of intended effort but less so for achievement or proficiency (Al-Hoorie, 2018). Much of the research based on Dörnyei's system has been quantitative; these studies often use self reporting measures which are correlated against an outcome measure such as intended effort or grades (e.g. Kong, et al., 2018; Papi, 2010, Moskovsky, et al., 2016). This causal or linear approach has been criticised for only skimming along the surface of motivational factors (Pavlenko, 2013) and for focusing on classroom-based contexts, thus ignoring the language struggles of different groups such as migrants (Norton, 2000). Some studies, however, have tried to place the model within a socio-cultural paradigm and have used qualitative approaches (e.g. Kubota, 2011; Van Mensel and Deconinck, 2019).

### *2.3.3 Example study in the Chinese context*

In the Chinese learner context, You and Dörnyei (2016) conducted a large-scale quantitative study which, despite variation in the results, concluded that participants had stronger self-perceptions of an L2 ideal self than an ought to self. You and Dörnyei used these results to challenge the concept of the 'Chinese imperative' (Chen, Warden and Chang, 2005) which proposes that Chinese learners are especially motivated by a long held meritocratic system of achievement in public exams which brings honour to the self and family (ought to self). The authors suggest that the results of this study are in line with those of other countries, thus signifying that cultural factors play a lower role within the formation of possible L2 selves. This positioning of motivation within psychological paradigms, i.e. as in an internal, rational, and cognitive construct, rather than socio-cultural, has met with general criticism from poststructuralist language researchers (e.g. Pavlenko, 2002; Norton, 2000). The authors do show variation between different regions of China and make an association between 'advanced' education systems and global English. They suggest that students from these advanced education systems had more vivid images of future L2 selves gained from stronger links to global English.

### *2.3.4 Problems with the L2 motivational self system*

The concept of the L2 possible selves and particularly the ideal self is appealing, especially for understanding university students who may have a strong sense of drive, direction and access to linguistic resources (Pavlenko, 2013). It is useful for language teachers to know if there is a relationship between a strong image of an ideal L2 self, effort, and proficiency, and this could inform curriculum development and teaching practices. However, Hoorie's (2018) meta-analysis painted a complex picture suggesting that Dörnyei's model is not fully developed, and the lack of consistent empirical evidence is problematic. Another key issue is the question that motivation researchers like Dörnyei are asking. Dörnyei is aiming to answer the question of how possible selves can create motivation which can be transferred into positive learning behaviours, and ultimately language attainment (You and Dörnyei, 2016). Though useful, this question misses the wider issue of empowerment within language learning, and how learners understand and navigate dominant systems and ideologies that place importance on English. Van Mensel and Deconinck (2019) make the point that the ideal self may be like the ought to self, in other words, the ideal self is also shaped by social expectations. Also, recent interest in translanguaging suggests that people might use different languages in a fluid or integrated way (Wei, 2018). This suggests that rather than a separate L2 self, learners integrate future visions of themselves using English into a more holistic identity.

### *2.3.5 Desire in language learning*

Another way to frame future selves is through the idea of desire. Kramsch (2006, p101), suggests that desire is "a basic drive towards self-fulfilment". For Kramsch, language learners are not aiming to create a separate L2 identity but to engage with a new social reality, new possibilities of the self, and more power. The future self is an idealised representation built from the signs or symbolic power of the target language. For example, fluency in English may be associated with 'international posture' (Yashima, 2013); i.e. having an international outlook and the confidence to communicate with speakers of other languages. This symbolic power can fuel desire in language learning as learners strive to engage with an enhanced version of themselves and belong to an imagined community (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

The symbolic power of languages can also be used by parents, teachers and institutions to influence learners' future self visions. Van Mensel and Deconinck (2019), for example, showed with interview data how parental desires for their children to enhance their linguistic capital as multilingual speakers were projected onto their children. Regarding teachers, Motha and Lin (2014), describe how teacher desires can obstruct learners' own goals. For example, teachers may want students to critically engage with English whereas students only wish to pass an exam. Institutions such as universities also emanate specific images of the desires they hold for students through their internationalisation policies, medium of instruction and promotional literature. For example, Gao's (2015) interviews with university policy makers shows their desire for students to become inter-culturally adept and networked graduates.

These examples illustrate that desire in language learning is not an isolated and internal process, but a lived negotiation of symbols and a site of struggle. According to Motha and Lin (2014), desire is co-constructed and may develop over years through parental, school, media and societal ideas and expectations. Language desires are meshed into different ideologies and on different timelines. In Hong Kong, for example, desire for English is so strong that it has resulted in an embittered battle between parents and medium-of-instruction policy makers. Parents have desired EMI for their children to enhance their chances of achieving a university place and accessing professional opportunities. Policy makers on the other hand have prioritised pedagogic engagement and better access to knowledge using the L1. The focal participants of this PhD study are embedded into this debate and the conflicting desires of different stakeholders.

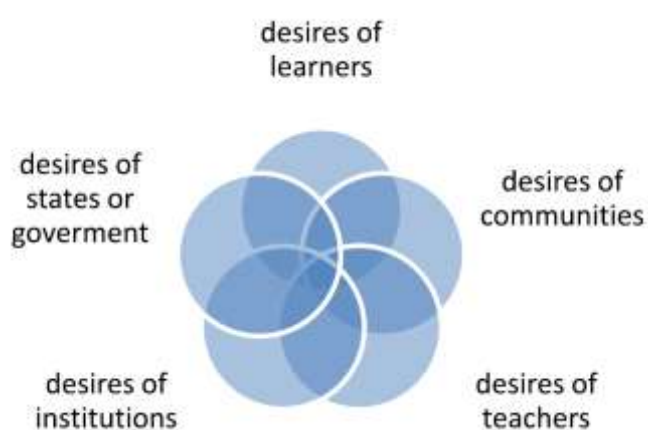
Motha and Lin (2014) pose some useful questions regarding the formation and pursuit of desires. The authors ask to what extent desires overlap, conflict with each other and whether learners have comparable or different desires. These questions are presented against the



backdrop of the many systems and processes that learners are embedded and entangled within and reinforce the idea that desires are co-constructed.

### *2.3.6 Framework of desire as multilayered*

In their framework of desire as multi-layered (below), Motha and Lin (2014) suggest possible layers (learners, communities, teachers, institutions, government) which interact and influence each other, and serve as way to understand how desires emerge. The framework aims to bring desire onto the conscious plane so that learners, teachers, policymakers and other stakeholders can assess, question and critique desire in English language learning. Desire in the framework is seen as a 'lack' (learners desire what they lack) and an 'energy' (a positive force to fulfil objectives) (Motha and Lin, 2014; Turner and Lin, 2020). The focus on learner desires can help to understand who informed their desires and question which desires are useful for the students' goals. Motha and Lin (2014) suggest that an explicit focus on language learning desires can help to identify which desires are serving the interests of which stakeholders. This in turn can help learners to have more "critical agency in their language learning pursuits" (Motha and Lin, 2014, p.351).



*Figure 2: Desire as multilayered by Motha and Lin (2014)*

### *2.3.4 Example study drawing on Motha and Lin's framework*

Liu (2019) conducted an ethnography of bilingual students (aged 17) studying at a private high school in Thailand. The study focusses on the construct of desire and draws on Motha and Lin's framework. Liu found that students embraced the discourse of investment in English for

global mobility. She also found evidence of students “revoicing the school’s desires” from promotional literature, suggesting the co-constructed nature of desire. Participants desired to be members of international communities, wanted access to academic English, and desired monolingual English immersion and interactive learning experiences. Liu found, however, that the participants’ desires were often in conflict and reproduced their own marginalisation with English. For example, participants inflicted cultural imperialism on themselves based on Anglocentric academic norms and binary notions of inner circle and outer circle accents. Liu’s study is useful in showing how the construct of desire can not only identify learner desires, but also how these desires were constructed. The depth in findings was facilitated by the ethnographic approach she adopted.

#### *2.3.4 Section summary*

This section has introduced the idea of possible selves and desires in language learning. Both concepts are useful because university students have a time bound goal (graduation) which gives them a specific point time to work towards and may produce strong self visions. Of note, the multi-layered construct of desire can help to identify why students pursue English and how these desires are constructed in the focal context. While motivation researchers tend to employ questionnaires as a central data source, qualitative research can reach deeper into the reasons behind the language learning desires of learners.

## **2.4 Investment in Language learning**

### *2.4.1 Introduction*

The last section focused on the concepts of ‘possible selves’ and ‘desire’ to show how language learners imagine new possibilities of the self when they engage in language learning. This section focusses on investment in language learning which is interrelated and fuelled by learner desires and images of their possible selves. The concept of investment is important because it seeks to understand the situated, complex and developing connections between learners’ desires, identities and commitment to language practices (Norton and Toohey, 2011).

#### *2.4.2 Model of investment*

Bonny Norton has been instrumental in bringing the concept of investment to the attention of applied linguists. Norton's (Norton Peirce, 1995) early article introducing the concept of investment, positions language learning not only as an individual psychological pursuit, but as a situated relationship between the learner and the target language. This relationship is influenced by power relations and language learning is a negotiation of access to the target language and their communities. Norton's model of investment aims to recognise that learners invest in languages based on an expected return. This return may include symbolic and material resources which can enhance the mobility prospects of the learner. In the context of an EMI university, for example, learners may invest in English because they see it as a way to enhance employment prospects and contribute to an identity as a globally oriented person (Doiz and Lasagaster, 2018).

Norton's concept of investment in language learning was influenced by Bourdieu's work on capital. Bourdieu (1987) saw that power flows within different forms of capital; namely economic (a person's material resources), cultural (including knowledge, qualifications and language) and social (networks, membership, connections). Symbolic capital is capital that is recognised and legitimised by influential groups and institutions, serving their interests or marginalising other interests. The makeup of a person's capital determines their social position as people align or differentiate themselves from others within social spaces. Individuals place value on the capital of others to determine their social position as well as positioning themselves. Through socialisation, this positioning forms a person's habitus - their dispositions, habits and behaviours which imitate those of a similar social group. The habitus therefore has an effect on the opportunities and possibilities of an individual, and on the power they hold within social structures, as they compete for legitimacy.

One of the influences of Bourdieu's ideas on Norton's thinking was to dismantle traditional dichotomies of learners often found in language teaching, such as "good/bad, motivated/unmotivated, anxious/confident, introvert/extrovert" (Darvin and Norton, 2015, p.37). The theory of investment sees learners not as individuals with fixed traits but as people in specific contexts who have been positioned in unequal ways. This view sees learners as having complex and fluid identities which they negotiate within different fields of socialisation and social interaction. Investment in a language is a negotiation of these power structures as learners contest and reposition themselves. Researchers taking an investment approach are less interested in what motivates students at a task or class level, and instead seek to understand the underlying structures and conditions that bring a student to invest in certain language practices.

In 2015, Darwin and Norton enhanced Norton's original conception of investment in language research to take into account changes in global systems, technology and ways of communicating. The authors' aim was to provide a model that could critically shed light on micro and macro language practices and address issues of power within a globalising world where identity is becoming more fluid. The model of investment shown below has three interlinking constructs: identity, capital and ideology.



Figure 3: Darwin and Norton's (2015) model of investment

Darvin and Norton (2015; 2016; Norton, 2013) see identity as a changing and contested site across time and space. It is the negotiation between habitus and desire. Through habitus, individuals learn their place and status in the world, and through desire they can imagine possible futures to reposition themselves. One way that they reposition themselves is through the accumulation of capital, for example, by investing in particular language practices. Taking a poststructuralist stance, Darwin and Norton view identity as a site of struggle because of the contextual constraints and competing ideologies that restrain and shape learners' desires. As desire may be shaped by ideologies which do not necessarily serve the interests of the learner, there is a critical emphasis to their approach, namely "to examine how worldviews construct learners' desires and imagined identities that can be complicit with reproducing social inequalities" (Darvin and Norton, 2016; p.26). In the model illustrated above, a learner's positioning is negotiated at the intersection between identity and ideology. How students position themselves in relation to English is important for their identity construction, and Norton and Toohey (2011) suggest that the connection with a language needs to be meaningful to bring about investment.

According to Darwin and Norton (2015; 2016), ideologies are multi-layered hegemonic processes that reproduce dominant culture and control the flow of capital. Within Darwin and

Norton's model of investment, ideologies influence learner identity and desires, and determine what kind of capital is valued. As a regulating force, ideologies can determine "inclusion and exclusion" and position learners "in multiple ways even before speak" (Darvin and Norton, 2015, p.43). Darvin and Norton (2016) argue that ideologies have a paradoxical nature, for example, the discourse of globalisation promotes the notion of mobility but concurrently exercises control and access to this mobility. They also believe that dominant and marginal ideologies compete to form dispositions in learners which inform how they think and act, and within a spectrum of consent and dissent room is created to "restructure contexts" (Darvin and Norton, 2015, p.44). By critically understanding the "hegemonic pull" of patterns of ideological control, Darvin and Norton (2016, p.28) believe that learners can not only access desired knowledge and communities, but also stake their place as legitimate speakers. This sentiment is echoed by Motha and Lin (2014) who suggest that learners can critically assess their language learning desires, Flores (2013) who encourages learners to question neoliberal narratives in their language practices, and Kubota (2011) who urges more critical questioning of the role and status of English. From a practical perspective, Rose and Galloway (2017) demonstrated a classroom activity which encourages students to critically question the ownership of English. It is through this type of critical assessment that learners may be able to reframe their language learning experience and stake more claims as legitimate speakers.

Drawing on Bourdieu, Darvin and Norton (2016, p.28) affirm that "capital is power". As mentioned earlier, there are different forms of capital including economic, cultural and social. English is a form of linguistic capital (a part of cultural capital) and is valued widely as "a tool for social inclusion" and "economic and social advancement" (Park, 2011, p.443). By investing in English, learners perceive that their linguistic capital will bring returns, for example in gaining employment or accessing new communities. However, the view of English as capital for advancement has been questioned by applied linguists as not fulfilling its promise (Park, 2011, Kubota, 2021; Sah, 2020). Sah (2020), for example, highlights that there are social justice concerns with EMI as access to English linguistic capital is not equal.

When learners shift contexts, for example from school to university, their capital is ascribed a value. As Darvin and Norton (2016, p.28) note, "learners are positioned in the social space based on the volume, composition and trajectory of their capital". In terms of lower proficiency students who possess less English linguistic capital, the university may place them into a particular programme or course which positions them in a certain way. This is what happened to Marshall's (2009) multilingual participants at a Canadian university who were placed into a remedial ESL class. Marshall (2009) argued that this remedial ESL identity positioned the participants through a deficit lens rather than recognising their multilingual repertoires. Darvin and Norton (2016) suggest that hierarchies are formed through the requirements of institutions,

which can lead to lower positioning of some students and therefore stunting the accumulation of new capital. These arguments are useful for understanding how lower proficiency students are positioned in EMI settings and the effects this has on their learning trajectories.

#### *2.4.3 Example studies influenced by the concept of investment*

Darvin and Norton's model of investment has been used in qualitative studies which aim to understand students' perspectives of their language learning journeys. Sung (2020) showed how cross-border students from Mainland China invested heavily in their academic English identities at an EMI university in Hong Kong. However, the same students did not possess the capital to access social English opportunities. The study shows how the participants selectively invested in English based on which pursuits would "yield a good return" (Sung, 2020, p.13). Teng (2019) also used the investment model to investigate the English journeys of three university students at a non-prestigious university in China. Teng found that the learners experienced problems with their low English proficiency which manifested in different levels of investment. One participant disengaged from English, pursuing self-employment rather than graduate employment which demanded English skills. Another participant felt anxious with English and lacking confidence, positioned herself at the periphery of the learning community. The third student invested heavily in English in an attempt to overcome her language difficulties and compete as a legitimate English user in the graduate jobs market. The study shows the students' differing investments based on their English experiences at university. Both studies outlined above show how the investment model is a robust lens to gain insights into the student journey.

#### *2.4.4 Section summary*

This section has focused on Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment. The model suggests that language learning is on one level, a project to enhance one's social, cultural and economic capital, and on another level is a "socially and historically constructed relationship between learners and the target language" (Darvin and Norton, 2015, p.20). Through the constructs of identity, ideology and capital, the investment model provides a robust lens to evaluate students' language learning journeys.

## 2.5 Neoliberalism and the promise of English

### 2.5.1 Introduction

The last section looked at how language can be viewed as capital, and language learning can be seen as the accumulation of capital. This is especially the case for students of EMI universities who may see investment in English as enhancing their linguistic capital for increasing their job prospects. Neoliberalism is a lens which is closely related to the idea of the view of language as capital and will be discussed in this section.

### 2.5.2 Defining neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a political and economic approach which has manifested itself into many different areas of social and personal life in recent years. Block and Gray (2016, p.482), define neoliberalism as a "a number of diverse phenomena, activities and behaviours" which have saturated "economic, political, social, geographical and cultural" life (Block, 2018, p.74). Neoliberalism is seen as a brand of capitalism which favours market freedom and deregulation (Holborow, 2013; Block and Gray, 2016) where states compete in a global economy (Fairclough, 2000).

The ideological nature of neoliberalism has been presented by Fairclough (2000, p. 147) as a "fact of life" and by Dardot and Laval (2013, as cited in Block, 2018, p.106) as a new "form of existence and rationality". These authors relay that neoliberal logic has become an invisible and unquestioned ideology dissolved into all aspects of social life presenting itself as a reality that already exists (Lemke, 2001). Fairclough (2000) speaks of the discourse of neoliberalism which is progress, opportunity, growth, flexibility and transparency achieved through competition, privatisation and free trade. However, many authors have suggested that neoliberalism has instead led to insecurity (Fairclough, 2000), inequality (Piller and Cho, 2013), and misery (Shin and Park, 2016).

### 2.5.3 Neoliberalism and the individual

Within the free-market conditions outlined above, there is more onus on social actors to invest in themselves to remain competitive (Chun, 2009). The 'entrepreneur of the self' (Foucault, 2008) is a self-managed collection of investments; a "corporatization of the individual subject" (Flores, 2013, p. 504). According to Lemke (2002), individuals assess the costs and benefits

of each act in an expression of 'free will' to determine their own trajectory. The neoliberal discourse is an enabling of individuals to be free of past constraints and to design their own futures. However, some argue that the discourse of individual liberty is more centred on competition than civic liberty (e.g. Piller and Cho, 2013). This places greater demands on individuals to upgrade their skills in tune with the changing demands of the market.

#### *2.5.4 Language and neoliberalism*

As individuals endeavour to make themselves marketable, the languages they use become assets in their ensemble of cultural capital. Language has therefore become a commodity with a market value (Heller, 2010). As Heller states (2010, p. 108), language acts as a "resource to be produced, controlled, distributed, valued and constrained". Individuals may invest in a language depending on what rate of return they expect to receive; this could be financial, through future earnings, or other returns such as well-being and status (Schroedler, 2018). The view of language as a commodity to enhance a person's life prospects is a detachment from a view of language as a reflection of cultural identities (Duchêne and Heller, 2012). Foreign language learning has also changed track to be seen as an economic rather an intellectual activity (Coulmas, 2005). Some languages are therefore seen to yield higher rates of return than others and these languages have become the priority of parents, who want their children to succeed in the future job market. Highly valued languages also become the priority of governments, which through language policy and education, dictate which languages they see as useful for the state's competitiveness.

#### *2.5.5 The promise of English*

English is commonly considered to be a language of high value within the current global climate. For example, English is often perceived to be the language of globalisation, the internet, the knowledge economy and international business (Majhanovich, 2014). The promise of English is that it can provide better employability, social inclusion, status and social mobility for those who learn it (Park, 2011). Through the neoliberal lens, investment in English, as opposed to investment in other languages, is a cost-benefit decision. A common narrative is that as a language of prestige and high exchange value, English can enable participation in the global economy and access to material resources (Duchêne and Heller, 2012).

Governments, institutions and parents have placed great effort into the teaching and learning of English, but this is often at the cost of local and national languages, and knowledge and



culture expressed in these languages (Kirkpatrick, 2011; Phillipson, 2017; Majhanovich, 2014; Schroedler, 2018). Phillipson (2017) argues that linguistic capital accumulation often coexists with linguistic capital dispossession. Linguistic capital dispossession occurs when learning a new language comes at the cost of first languages, and these losses occur within certain domains, such as business, scholarship and the home. Examples include the sole use of English in academic journals at the cost of academic literacy in other languages, and parents speaking English to their children at the cost of their first language. In these cases, English is subtractive and not used "additively, as an enlargement of personal repertoires and national competence" (Phillipson, 2017, p.324).

Though individuals can gain from English within the current global economy, English is layered into existing structures of inequality, and therefore the benefits of English are experienced differently. English is thus not a neutral commodity that is accessed equally by those who invest in it (Tollefson, 1991). In Sah and Li's (2018) study of a rural school in Nepal, for example, English did not live up to the promise of social mobility and students could not compete with those from private schools. Phillipson (2017, p. 313) argues, in fact, that English "intensifies the gaps between the world's haves and have nots". In Hong Kong, families with economic and cultural capital are better able to compete for places in English medium schools, and students from these schools are more likely to attend university (Tsang, 2009, as cited in Evans, 2013) and thus enter skilled and better paid occupations. Through limited places at English medium schools, English in Hong Kong has become a finite resource which is competed over.

Relating to Bourdieu (1986), dominant countries, institutions and people control the flow of capital, and this is one way in which inequality is intensified. Park (2011), for example, makes the point that English competence is regulated by those in power. Park uses TOEIC scores to show how test scores are exemplified as objective markers of competence, but rising scores have meant a redefinition of what counts as a competent English user. What used to be considered an adequate level of competence has been downgraded and individuals have to compete to reach an even higher standard.

#### *2.5.6 Neo-liberalism and universities*

The past three decades has seen the increasing influence of neoliberal ideals on how universities are perceived, funded and managed. Globalisation, internationalisation, and English medium instruction have been part of this process. In the past, universities were commonly seen as publicly funded centres of learning, but have more recently gone through

a process of commercialisation and massification (Lynch, 2006). Hadley (2015, p. 6) defines a neoliberal university as a "self-interested entrepreneurial organisation offering recursive educational experiences and research services for paying clients". As governments reduce public funding, the onus is increasingly on universities to develop their own income streams (Mok, 2007). In many countries, for example, universities now charge tuition fees. As students incur costs for their studies, university is more commonly seen as a financial investment, and many prospective students conduct a cost-benefit analysis to determine the worth of a particular degree (Sá, 2018). Universities are also ranked to determine their value, and prospective students compete for places at higher ranked universities. These university brand names serve as credentials and inform the market value of a graduate. As these elite graduates are more likely secure better jobs, their universities, in turn, secure higher employability rankings (e.g. QS Graduate Employability Rankings) and thus are able to be more selective over the students and staff they recruit. Harkavy (2006) warns that the commodification of universities along with the reinforcement of economic self-interest has a profound effect on social justice and on the ambitions, values and citizenship of students.

Neoliberal universities are not companies, but they often act like companies. One example is the managerialism and "CEO-style executive leadership; goal-driven production, output measurement and performance management" (Marginson, 2013, p. 355). Metrics such as research output, number of citations, rankings of journals, student numbers, and teacher to student ratio are all seen as indicators of quality in a culture of 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter and Rhodes, 2004). At my institution, Student Feedback Questionnaires and research output (for academic-track staff) influence promotion, pay increments and contract renewal. This metrics-based culture has a controlling impact on course delivery and research direction.

#### *2.5.7 Examples studies using a neoliberal lens*

Researching neoliberal ideologies within language learning has been conducted in various ways. Chun (2009) analysed the ideological discourses of an International Education Programme website and EAP textbooks. Chun found a recurring positioning of students as unfinished entrepreneurial projects and suggested that "critical interrogations of neoliberal discourses can open up spaces for alternative subject positions" (p.119). Sah (2020) analysed language policies and EMI research in South Asia. Sah framed his study in terms of human capital theory which takes an instrumental view of English for socioeconomic mobility. This study emphasises the gap between government policy and the classroom experiences of students and teachers, and reveals how access to quality English provision is marred by

existing social inequalities. Ryuko Kubota has been influential in highlighting paradoxes between neoliberal ideology and language practices. Kubota's 2011 study, for example, showed how gender, age, health and geography had a larger impact on the prospects of the interviewees than English test scores. The study showed how the experiences of the participants were not always in line with the promises of linguistic instrumentalism. Kubota and Takeda's (2021) study also used a neoliberal lens to unpack how policy makers and corporate workers in Japan differently interpret communicative competence. While policy makers focused exclusively on the four skills of English and their measurability, the corporate workers held more holistic and fluid notions of communicative competence which included interpersonal skills, plurilingualism, and multicultural understanding. The studies above question neoliberal notions of English for capital gain and emphasise a need for students and teachers to critically analyse the instrumental pursuit of English.

#### *2.5.8 Section summary*

Neoliberalism is an economic and ideological stance which views individuals as self-entrepreneurs. Through this lens, English is perceived as an essential commodity for mobility. Access to English, however, is not equal and investment in English may result in language dispossession. Universities have also been influenced by neoliberalism and use English as a method to remain competitive. Studies have shown that there is inconsistency between the discourse of English as capital and the reality in specific contexts.

## 2.6 English medium instruction (EMI) in universities

### *2.6.1 Introduction*

This section will focus on the key motivators and challenges of EMI from the student perspective. The previous sections focused on the theoretical lenses useful for my study, in the following section, I focus on research which has been conducted with students in EMI university settings.

### *2.6.2 Motivators of EMI for students*

Studies have shown wide student support for EMI. Galloway, Numajiri and Rees (2020), for example, found that students in China and Japan thought that English would enable them to pursue specialised knowledge, heighten their employability and mobility, and help them to participate in globalisation. Chapple (2015) reported that language improvement and making international friends were motivators for students in lower-tier universities in Japan. In China again, Beckett and Li (2012, p.54) reported wide student support for content subjects being taught in English and concluded that they could “kill two birds with one stone”. In Hong Kong, Sung (2020) found that English was part of students’ desired academic identities, which would help them to be validated members of the academic community. Sung also found that discourses of English as an academic and global language motivated students to invest in their EMI studies. In Spain, Doiz and Lasagabaster (2018) used the L2 motivational self system to show that the ‘ought to’ self influenced students to pursue undergraduate studies in English. Results of this study showed that it was seen as an expectation of students to study some subjects in English to enrich their CVs and impress employers. Doiz and Lasagabaster (2018, p.671) concluded that EMI has become “an important feature of students’ multilingual identity” and a societal expectation. The studies above have shown that EMI is often motivating for students to enhance their skills, prospects, identities, and for providing opportunities to engage in new communities. There are also some societal expectations which fuel desire for EMI.

### *2.6.2 Surviving EMI*

Despite student support for EMI, there are many challenges in studying content subjects in English and research suggests that students need to place much effort and determination into their EMI studies. In terms of surviving EMI, Evans and Morrison (2011, p.12) reported that “diligence, determination and relentless day-to-day practice” was required of lower proficiency students. Doiz and Lasagabaster (2018, p.669) reported, however, that EMI did “not take an important toll on the personal lives” of their participants, though they did need to spend extra effort on EMI classes. Not all students thrive in EMI environments and some research suggests that EMI can push students to the edge of the learning community. Teng’s (2018) narrative inquiry with Chinese undergraduates showed how one participant struggled to cope with English which led to him to disengage from his studies and desired communities. Lack of English proficiency therefore led to “peripheral participation” in the new learning community (Teng, 2018, p.54). Another of Teng’s participants was disappointed with the EMI experience which focused on marks rather than communication. She resorted to ‘tactical compliance’ and

went along with the EMI experience for the sake of career prospects (p.55). Sung (2019) recorded the identity struggles of an undergraduate student at an EMI university in Hong Kong and reported that the student was frustrated with his lack of vocabulary, and could only utter simple sentences. This led to a silencing in the classroom and lack of engagement with international students. Sung's participant eventually disengaged from pursuing an academic identity and instead tried to negotiate a professional English identity through a part-time job. The work of Teng and Sung is especially useful in showing the struggles that students experience as they try to negotiate their place in the new EMI setting.

### *2.6.3 Language challenges*

In recent years there has been a growing number of studies assessing the language challenges of students in EMI university settings. These transition studies often focus on the first year experience which is a critical year for students in integrating into the new learning environment (Evans and Morrison, 2011a; 2011b). Evans and Morrison (2011a; 2011b) conducted one of the most influential studies related to student challenges in university EMI settings. Their longitudinal study included interviews with 28 students and a 45-item questionnaire with 3,009 first-year students. Qualitative results (2011a) showed that students held specific challenges in the areas of technical vocabulary, lecture listening, using academic style, and adhering to the conventions of the academic community. Quantitative results (2011b) showed that writing posed the most challenge, including understanding assignments requirements, planning, conforming to discipline conventions, and expressing themselves articulately. A study conducted at the same institution ten years later (Shepard and Morrison, 2021) confirmed Evans and Morrison's earlier work. In this later study which used a questionnaire (n=636) and interviews (n=32) as data collection tools, writing was the most severe challenge, and especially using an appropriate academic style, planning assignments and expressing ideas correctly. A significant implication of these studies is that a change in language policy at the secondary level between the studies, from a Chinese language policy to a fine-tuning policy, does not appear to have affected the results.

Other studies have also shown linguistic difficulties in adapting to EMI programmes. Pessoa, Miller and Kaufer (2014), for example, used text analysis to trace the writing development of undergraduates at a Qatari university. The study found that vocabulary, writing longer texts, and academic style caused problems for students. Yung and Fong's (2019) interviews with first-year students in Hong Kong showed problems in integrating sources into academic writing and avoiding formulaic phrases taught to prepare for school examinations. Lecture listening and especially understanding technical vocabulary has caused problems in various contexts

(Hellekjær, 2010; Stepanovienė, 2012; Chang, 2010). Pun and Jin (2021), however, showed a fairly low level of student challenge with language in EMI studies which suggests that language challenges may affect certain students in specific contexts.

The impact of students' language of instruction at school is one factor which has drawn the attention of scholars and appears to affect students' level of language challenge at university. Lin and Morrison (2010) conducted one well known study using receptive and productive vocabulary tests ( $n=762$ ) and argumentative academic essays ( $n=413$ ) as data gathering tools. The results showed that EMI students performed much better on the tests than CMI students ( $p < 0.5$ ) and the authors concluded that CMI students were particularly disadvantaged due to their previous lack of exposure to English. Evans and Morrison (2018) focused on the language challenges of first-year students and compared the responses of EMI and CMI schooled students. The study used a 71-item questionnaire and included two sets of interviews with 40 and 37 participants. In the study, 73% of the CMI students had attained a DSE English score of 3 as opposed to only 19% of the EMI students. Again, the results showed significant differences between the EMI and CMI schooled students and these differences were across most of the items and all skills. However, mean scores for CMI students did not exceed 3.5 on a Likert scale of 1 - 6 (6 = very difficult), and therefore the authors concluded that these students may have made positive strides with language across year 1. Despite interview data showing severe challenges in vocabulary and reading for CMI students, they appeared to manage their studies through sheer effort and determination. In the Japanese context, Aizawa and Rose (2020) focused on the impact of schooling language on the language challenges and vocabulary sizes of 107 year 1-3 EMI students. The authors used a 45-item questionnaire, receptive and productive vocabulary tests and interviews with 10 students. Like the studies in the Hong Kong context, the results showed that students with more exposure to English at high school suffered fewer linguistic challenges and had significantly larger vocabulary repertoires. The study also showed a positive correlation between receptive and productive vocabulary size and ease with language in the EMI setting. These studies show that language is a challenge for many students in EMI settings, but especially so for those with less experience of English at school.

#### *2.6.4 English proficiency level of content lecturers*

Lecturers' English proficiency levels have also been shown to affect the student EMI experience. There is currently no benchmark minimum level of English required for teaching in EMI settings (Dearden, 2014; Macaro, et al., 2018). Overall, the literature suggests that lecturer proficiency levels can cause problems for students. In a study by Galloway, Kriukow

and Numajiri (2017), students reported that lecturers' proficiency was limited, and they used L1 to teach difficult concepts, and relied on PowerPoint and reading slides. Lack of lecturer confidence with teaching in English was reported by Chapple (2015) and a reduced learning of content was reported by Beckett and Li (2012) and Hu, Li and Lei (2014). Understanding lecturers with a low level of English was one of the main listening challenges of first-year students in Hong Kong (Jarvis, Kohnke and Guan, 2020). Inbar-Lourie and Donitsa-Schmidt (2020, p.307) identified five student expectations of lecturers. Language expertise and 'full control of the language' to make learning more 'professional, precise and serious' was important for students. Results also showed that 'subject matter expertise', 'international expertise', 'pedagogical expertise', and 'second language pedagogical expertise' were important for students. These results show that students are looking for more than high proficiency levels in lecturers and want to engage in internationalisation and develop their own proficiency. Bradford (2019) warns against over-problematising lecturer proficiency, suggesting that many problems can be overcome with pedagogy instruction and curriculum design. Sahan, Rose and Macaro (2021) also advocate for more professional development with lecturers in EMI settings to introduce different styles of teaching and encourage more interactive pedagogies. From the research, it is clear that content lecturers have a large impact on the EMI experience and students have high expectations for the quality of language and instruction used in classes.

#### *2.6.5 Internationalisation*

One important aspect of the first year EMI journey is engagement in internationalisation. Internationalisation has been a driving force for adopting EMI (Rose, et al., 2020b) and so there is a direct link between the two. In embracing EMI, university stakeholders have reported that they can internationalise their teaching staff, curricula, research output, and increase international impact and course profiles (Rose, et al., 2020b). At its heart, internationalisation aims to foster intercultural communication and social development but Bowles and Murphy (2020) question whether the focus on English has undervalued other languages and cultures. Internationalisation and its by-product of EMI therefore potentially reduce intercultural communication to a set of cultural norms stemming from Anglophone countries. Kirkpatrick (2011) laments the narrow focus of current internationalisation policies that prioritise English as the medium of instruction. Kirkpatrick insists that internationalisation should be multicultural and multilingual. Speaking of the Hong Kong context, Kirkpatrick (2011, p.11) suggests that universities have missed the chance to promote tri-lingual language policies (Cantonese/Mandarin/English) as a different version of internationalisation to "Anglo-Saxon

paradigms". Gu and Lee (2018), however found that Western teaching approaches were integrated with local approaches at a Chinese university, painting a complex picture of how internationalisation was integrated into the curriculum.

Another issue regarding the internationalisation of universities is the pressure to focus on knowledge published in English. Lillis, et al. (2010) conducted a study on four non-Anglophone universities and through interviews with academics, found that they faced great pressure to publish in English, cite English sources, and exclude sources in other languages. The authors concluded that there is a gate keeping evaluation and stratification process within journals based on Anglophone norms and practices. These findings are supported by Xu, Rose and Oancea (2021) who analysed 172 university policy documents and interviewed senior administrators and journal editors in the Chinese context. The study found that most of the universities incentivised international publications by offering bonuses and enhanced career opportunities to their academics. With universities increasingly pressured to compete on an international playing field, publication metrics are used as an indicator of research and institution quality. Higher ranking journals tend to publish in English and there is increased pressure to publish in these journals. This has the effect of prioritising knowledge produced in English, and hence promoting Anglophone approaches to knowledge.

Regarding student perspectives on opportunities to use English for academic and social communication, evidence shows that in Hong Kong, English is used in formal teaching but less so for social communication (Evans and Morrison, 2011a; Gardner and Lau (2019). Gardner and Lau's (2019) mixed methods study of 278 first-year Hong Kong and Mainland students concluded that social activities were pitched at Cantonese speakers in an almost "discriminatory" way, with Mainland students feeling excluded. This study shows that integration between students is not automatic; as Lauridsen (2020, p.208) puts it, "internationalization is an intentional process" and "does not happen by osmosis". University internationalisation policies therefore need to be structured into programme implementation to ensure that a wide range of students benefit. An in-depth study by Sung (2019) showed how the focal participant felt disappointed by the lack of organised activities to interact with international students. This participant could not gain access to social circles with international students and disinvested in his attempts to enhance his intercultural communication skills on campus. Research is lacking into whether lower proficiency students can engage in internationalisation.



### 2.6.6 Section summary

EMI is motivating for students and is reported to be well-received. Students perceive that they can gain important cultural and social capital in their EMI studies which can increase their employability and mobility. However, EMI poses many challenges for students. Linguistic challenges not only affect content understanding but also access to the university community. Lower proficiency students including those with less EMI schooling have the hardest transition to EMI university. The proficiency levels of content lecturers and their facilitation of EMI and internationalisation also have an impact on the student experience. Internationalisation is a key driving force for EMI but evidence suggests that not all students benefit from internationalisation policies.

## 2.7 Chapter summary

This chapter began by exploring contextual and relational approaches to researching language learners. These approaches view learners as embedded into social contexts across different timescales. It was suggested that learners position themselves in relation to others and these positionings are often unevenly distributed. Learners, sometimes, however, contest these positionings to afford themselves more space for redirecting their language learning trajectories. The second part of Chapter 2 focused on possible selves and desire in language learning. Possible selves relate to the idea that learners strive towards a vision of themselves using English in new and authentic situations. The desire as multilayered model developed by Motha and Lin (2014) was put forward to show that desire for English is contested and co-constructed. The third section of Chapter 2 focused on the notion that learners view English as an investment and expect a return on this investment. The work of Darvin and Norton (2015; 2016) is particularly appealing as a framework for viewing English in terms of capital. Related to this view is the lens of neoliberalism which was explored in the fourth section of this chapter. This fourth section highlighted how English is increasingly seen as a commodity essential to employability and access to global communities. However, it was also discussed how the promise of English often results in the maintenance of inequalities. The final section reported on studies that focus on EMI at universities. This section highlighted that EMI is often desired by students but comes at personal costs and can affect content learning. Language challenges, especially related to vocabulary, were stated as widely reported issues within the EMI literature. Other issues reported included the language proficiency levels of content lecturers and access to internationalisation. In summary, this chapter has shown that English is a site of struggle and promise for learners. The prestige and perceived instrumental value of English heighten

pressure and competition for the language, but also offer hope in accessing new opportunities and communities.

## **CHAPTER 3 *Research methodology***

### **3.1 Chapter overview**

This chapter begins by discussing what I view as valid knowledge in answering the research questions. I then describe the research approach, data collection tools and the design and procedures of the research. After this, I give details of the research site and participants. I then describe how I analysed the data. Finally, I discuss researcher positionality and ethics.

### **3.2 Ontological and epistemological position**

This study looks deeply into the experiences and perspectives of lower proficiency students attending an English medium university in Hong Kong. The study draws on the proposition that social reality is “discursively constructed, reproduced [and] naturalised” (Pérez-Milans, 2016, p.84) within complex social, cultural and economic systems, conditions and networks. Following poststructuralist authors like Norton and Toohey (2011), I view participants as having their own valid interpretations of reality fashioned by their own unique sets of conditions and experiences. This suggests that there is not one objective reality to be discovered but social reality is situated and multi-perspective. That said, the participants’ conditions and experiences have most likely been shaped and limited by the social, cultural and economic systems they have lived through and therefore, the participants may have shared elements in their individual interpretations of reality. It is possible to draw plausible conclusions from these shared explanations and viewpoints to “distil a consensus construction” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p.111). The explanations drawn from my research are not representations of an objective reality, but acknowledgements that multiple valid interpretations of reality overlap and can be called common experiences and attitudes. Participants may also have differing perceptions of a phenomenon making it hard to make generalisations. I would not view this as a weakness as the study aims to engage in the complexity of the issues. This complexity, according to Ortega (2012, p.210) “produces not only more socially useful and ethically responsible knowledge but also better and more valid knowledge”. In summary, my study aims to listen to the voices of participants to represent common and conflicting interpretations of their experiences. The aim is not to unearth a singular reality but to illuminate the common ground and major tensions.

This study takes a social constructivist stance to knowledge. That is, individuals endeavour to bring meaning to their lives and this meaning is constructed and negotiated within social and historical contexts (Creswell, 2013). Within this paradigm, researchers seek to understand the

complexity of meanings people attach to experience. The social constructivist view also sees that perspectives are continually negotiated and reshaped. Meaning making is an ongoing process “subject to shift, to deepening, to fresh connecting up” (Hymes, 1996, p.9). To get to the heart of a matter, researchers can take an in-depth, qualitative, situated approach and acknowledge the subjective, complex and changing way meaning is interpreted.

This epistemological stance serves to understand deep changes that have been occurring in late modernity. This includes increased uncertainty and a shift from fixed to more fluid identities. Within this new climate, “instability, difference and mobility” have become the focal point of research with more emphasis on context and how social actors produce and negotiate meaning within these contexts (Pérez-Milans, 2016, p.84). This research is conducted less in a top-down, insider-outsider way and is more focused on the collaborative, critical and democratic production of knowledge.

### 3.3 Methodology

My study situates participants and the inquirer as co-constructors of knowledge in the research process. The study takes a qualitative approach and sees dialogue (i.e. two-way interaction and discussion) as a solid way to conduct research and verify claims (Denzin and Giardina, 2009). This type of research is dialectical; meaning is elicited, discussed and developed with participants until a deep understanding of the issues emerge and plausible explanations have been reached. Qualitative analysis goes back and forth between the data and the emerging themes and aims to make connections between these themes (Polkinghorne, 1995). As the process continues, participants can help to verify the claims the researcher makes thus increasing their reliability. It is through this process that deeper claims can be made about participants and the complex and dynamic conditions that shape their world views.

This methodology, with the focus on dialogue, emphasises the voices of the participants who are the ones doing the language learning (Benson, 2013). In their study, Flowerdew and Miller (2013, p.44), suggested that the research participants were engaging with them “on a journey of discovery about their language learning experiences”. This positioned them as collaborators in the research “rather than seeing them as subjects to be studied”. In this sense, research participants are not seen as static vessels of insider knowledge but dynamic meaning making players situated in a given time and space. A qualitative approach enables the researcher to join the participants as they journey through their everyday lives.

The approach I adopt in this study aims to not only involve the participants but also benefit and empower them. This fits with Rampton's (1992, p.56) classification of research which is "on, for and with informants". It is not only the researcher who gains insights through this type of research process but also the participants as they are given opportunities to enhance their own perceptions. Through regular contact and the building of rapport, participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences and challenge their beliefs which helped to develop new ways of thinking and acting. With this approach, participants helped to guide and shape the themes and conclusions that came out of the research.

### 3.4 Research approach

The ideas of Heller, Pietikäinen and Pujolar (2018) have been influential in guiding the research approach. This focal study takes a *critical ethnographic sociolinguistic* approach (Heller, Pietikäinen and Pujolar, 2018).

In terms of being critical, this study aims to go beyond asking what participants find challenging about English, to investigating what has led students to invest or not invest in English. Heller, Pietikäinen and Pujolar (2018) explain that critical inquiry means investigating power and inequality in the situated study, and the consequences of social processes on the participants. This perspective of critical inquiry fits with my aims as I am concerned with the underlying forces and conditions which influence students' positioning in the discourse about English. Cannella and Lincoln (2009, p.54) link power structures to late capitalism and see that the researcher's role is to "illuminate the hidden structures of power deployed in the construction and maintenance of its own power, and the disempowerment of others". Cannella and Lincoln (2009) outline two central questions that qualitative researchers can consider to help shed light on structures that maintain power, or deny access to it:

1. Who/what is helped/privileged/legitimated?
2. Who/what is harmed/oppressed/disqualified?

These questions helped to frame my study, which investigates how English legitimises or disqualifies lower proficiency students. It is envisioned that participant voices can build credible explanations to inform practice, raise key issues, and improve the experiences of students and teachers (Hayes, 2013; Xu and Connelly, 2010).

This study takes an ethnographic approach. Heller, Pietikäinen and Pujolar (2018) emphasise that ethnographic studies go deep into the heart of a matter to explore and interpret the various processes at play. Participant voices and accounts are used to represent broader themes and narratives in order to give plausible reasoning for a given situation or process. In his view of ethnography, Hymes (1996) stresses the importance of knowledge which comes from interaction and observation. For Hymes, we cannot ignore this dimension of knowledge because our assumptions at the start of a study may turn out to be misplaced after deeper analysis. Taking an in-depth and dialectical approach helps the researcher to reduce pre-supposed knowledge and gain a clearer picture of the issue. Only after this in-depth and dialectical research process can we claim to hold valid interpretations. An ethnographic approach thus means researchers need to be involved at the research site and reflexive about their influence on the research (Dutta, 2014). Ethnography is suited to studying complex processes from the inside in order to slowly build up an intricate and multi-layered picture of what is being investigated. Similarly, I endeavoured to gain an in-depth awareness of the participants in their specific context of an EMI university in Hong Kong.

This study can be described as what Shaw, Copland and Snell (2016) refer to as a ‘topic-oriented’ ethnography. Situated in linguistic ethnography, rather than anthropological, this study does not seek to understand “all of a way of life” of a distant and different culture (Shaw, Copland and Snell, 2016, p.7). As a topic-oriented ethnography, this study concerns itself with “institutions and practices that surround us in contemporary life and understanding how they are embedded in wider social contexts and structures” (Shaw, Copland and Snell, 2016, p.7). This kind of study adopts an “ethnographic perspective” on focused aspects of the lives and practices of a particular social group (Green and Bloome, 1997, p.183, as cited in Shaw, Copland and Snell, 2016).

Lastly, this study takes a sociolinguistic approach by looking into the complex language situation in Hong Kong and how it has affected the participants. Heller, Pietikäinen and Pujolar (2018, p.2) highlight that sociolinguistic inquiry is a conversation “covering all kinds of investigations into how language matters, socially, politically and economically”. This approach fits my research design because the English language in Hong Kong is a politically sensitive and divisive issue. In Hong Kong, the English language is heavily linked to status, cultural capital and the expectations of influential institutions (Chan, 2014; Li, 2018; Poon, 2013).

### 3.5 Data collection tools

In this section, I will describe the data collection tools used in this study and the rationale for their use. In a later section, I will describe the procedures I used with these data collection tools and provide information about the mentoring sessions.

#### 3.5.1 *Reflective accounts*

Reflective writing can be used as a research method to study experience (Fook, 2011) and offers a “powerful insider account of the real lived experiences” of language students (Rose, 2019a, p.358). Reflective writing is used as part of my research process to enable the participating students to share their language learning histories and reflect on their university experiences. Reflective writing can help to develop self-awareness, ownership of stories, critical thinking, organisation of thoughts, and to understand the connections between different events and processes (Jasper, 2005). From this perspective, reflective writing can enrich the data because it enables the participants to reach a deeper level in their thinking. In contrast to the interviews, discussed below as collaborative investigations, a written reflection is an opportunity for the participants to take a personal and individual exploration of their thoughts and feelings. This helps to triangulate the findings not only from a different methods perspective, but also from the different thinking processes involved in personal writing and interviews.

Reflective accounts are documents or artefacts which are written over time and revisited to observe change in views or behaviours. Common examples are diaries and journals, in this study the term ‘reflection’ was used with students as it is a familiar term and task at university. Through these reflections, the participants were asked to reflect back on past experiences and forward on future hopes and goals. Reflective writing fits the ethnographic approach of this study and is one way to understand changes in positionality. The schedule for reflective writing is what Rose (2019a) describes as an ‘interval contingent design’ whereby learners write their reflections at pre-determined times. In the case of this study, this was at the start, middle and end of their first year at university. Rose (2019a) suggests that interval contingent designs are useful for studying complex changes occurring over time. The student written reflections in my study were completed before the interviews. Writing reflections before the interviews enabled the students to develop their thinking and set the scene for reaching a deeper level of discussion during the interviews. As language learners, this also aimed to help students articulate their thoughts and give them more confidence for the interview stage. The focus on

language articulation can help students to reach a more “critical” and “transformative” level in their reflections (Ryan, 2011, p.101).

Reflective writing is becoming common in university settings and developing first-year students’ awareness of this genre can help them to enhance their critical-reflective skills (Ryan, 2011). Students may not be accustomed to writing reflective accounts (Shariff and Zainuddin, 2017) and it is important to raise their awareness of this genre (Abednia, et al., 2013). In tune with the desire for the participating students to benefit directly from this research study, enhancing reflective skills could help prepare them for assignments at university. All students, for example, must take a service learning subject which includes voluntary work in the community, and reflection is a common assessment method. For my research, the purpose of the reflections needed to be clearly set, but the scope was left to the participants. Exemplars were not shared with participants, following Rose’s (2019) warning that they could limit the scope of the reflections.

### *3.5.2 Interviews*

This study adopts a qualitative interview approach. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), qualitative interviews are in-depth extended conversations which aim to understand the interviewees’ perspectives of their lived world. Qualitative interviews tend to focus on specific topics and encourage the interviewee to elaborate, discuss and give detailed descriptions. These types of interviews are understood to give voice to participants by enabling them to express their views and share their reflections on events or processes that have affected them. This differs from structured interview formats which focus on set questions and aim to fit answers into pre-existing categories. Qualitative interviewing fits the social constructivist epistemology of this study as a tool to develop in-depth insights from the participants’ perspective. Different elements of the qualitative interview approach taken in this study are described below.

This study aims to align with Talmy’s (2010) ideas of the research interview as ‘social practice’. This differs from seeing interviews as a ‘research instrument’. As a research instrument, interviews are used to mine for ‘truths’ and facts, and to retrieve information without impacting data with the researcher’s biases. Interviews in this light are seen as neutral spaces for participants to express their views. This type of interview fits a quantitative paradigm where truths are typically considered to be objective facts. In contrast, interviews as social practice are situated within a qualitative paradigm and the ontological and epistemological stance of this study. This stance sees that participants hold multiple, conflicting and developing truths



and a research process needs to acknowledge this flux. Kvale (1996) likens the interviewer to a 'traveller' rather than 'miner', meaning that the interviewer is not digging for untapped nuggets of truth but rather exploring the landscape with the interviewee. Interviews as social practice, according to Talmy (2010), therefore acknowledge the co-construction of accounts and the collaborative processes and influences they have on the findings.

This study also aims to take a reflexive approach by seeing the interviewer as situated in the research and having an influence on the meaning making process. Interviews are therefore co-constructed events. This means that researchers and participants are collaborating to explore and reach conclusions about a particular issue. Authors such as Mann (2011) call for more transparency about how the interview process is conducted and for researchers to take a critical look at how they influence the interaction. As well as focusing on what is said, Mann wants researchers to assess how interactions were managed and how meaning was constructed. For example, an interviewer's identity, status and attitudes affect the dynamics within an interview and this should be openly acknowledged and discussed. The perspective of seeing researchers as co-constructors means that they cannot extract their own presence and identity from the interviews and the researcher's job is to report the journey of the research and how data was collaboratively produced. The reflexive approach to interviewing can be beneficial for studies which pursue an in-depth exploration of complex issues where simple reporting of facts or views would not suffice.

I have considered to what extent an interview can represent the true views of interviewees. Although it could be argued that a neo-positivist stance reduces interviewer bias, direct reporting of views to set interview questions in a neutral interview space, even if possible, would not gain deep enough responses, and data reporting may be limited to detached lines of speech (Talmy, 2010). I have therefore taken on the perspective that developing rapport with interviewees and getting to know them would produce better results in terms of being able to understand their inner worlds. This approach helps to break down status barriers and encourage participants to feel comfortable in sharing their thoughts. Data produced are therefore not direct reflections of interviewees' singular inner worlds. The ontological stance of this study does not view this as possible as I consider that participants hold multiple and developing perspectives. Data are produced as 'accounts' which means that they exemplify individual aspects of the structured worlds of the participants (Baker, 2001).

Lastly, interviews are opportunities for speaking practice. When informing one participant that we would be doing the final interview she responded by saying "that's okay, it's just like chatting". The interviews for this student were a rare opportunity to practice English as well as tell her story. Nasrollahi Shahri (2018, p103) reported a similar observation in his study of

Iranian learners suggesting that his participants saw interviews as “arenas where they could display their English”. Galloway (2017, p.151) found that her student-participants viewed interviews as “extensions of class discussions”. The interviews in my research design were embedded into the learning experience for the students and this experience was designed to be beneficial to the participants. Though it could be argued that interviews in Cantonese would bring more articulation of the points, they may have been less motivating for the students who saw the interviews as a chance for language practice.

### *3.5.3 Field notes*

Field notes are used in ethnographic research to record observations in relation to the research questions and provide an outlet to record other points of interest that arise in the field (Copland, 2018). Field notes were mostly used in this study to record observations and interactions with the research participants. This interaction included weekly mentoring sessions with the focal students and ongoing email communication. Field notes were also used to record observations from work produced by the students, for example, their essays and presentations, including feedback and grades they received. In addition, field notes were used to record informal conversations I had with teachers in the English Centre. Lastly, I recorded observations of the research site and wider context, for example the unfolding policies and email communication from the English centre and senior university management during a protest movement and Covid-19. Following the advice of Curdt-Christiansen (2019), the field notes were used not only to record my observations, but also my reflections on the observations.

In terms of being an insider or outsider (Maharaj, 2016), as staff member I was an insider to the university context, but an outsider to the participants who were of a different age, first-language and background to me. The field notes were written from the perspective of my role as teacher-researcher trying to understand the journeys of the focal students. As the physical context of the university was familiar to me, the field notes were focused on understanding the students’ interpretation of this new learning context. I understand that my values affected the writing of field notes and therefore member checking (described later) of the developing themes was used as a measure to avoid researcher bias. Along the observer to participant continuum (Maharaj, 2016), I was a participant as I was engaged in the research site and invested in helping the students’ academic progression. This participation was as academic mentor and meant that my notes needed to be written after sessions. In the observer role, during the mentoring sessions and ongoing communication, I observed how the students were

getting on in their new context, how they interacted and what insights they shared with each other.

Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2011) suggest that the language of field notes is important, and they should be written in as a neutral way as possible. Punch (2012) agrees that field notes have an analytic feel but argues that the researcher's emotions are also important. Copland (2018, p.263) suggests that the distinction between the "observational self and the emotional self" is not "rigid" in sociolinguistics. These points relate to how objective or subjective in tone field notes should be. If field notes are to be integrated into the results, I take the view that they should be both analytical and include the emotional reflections of the researcher as part of a reflexive approach. Though objectivity is not a realistic goal, researchers can build trust with the academic community by taking a systematic, open and clear approach to writing field notes.

In addition to being integrated into the research findings, field notes are a useful way for researchers to track their own research journey and impact. As ethnographies can take different directions during the field research, field notes are a way to ensure the research does not take a wrong turn. De Costa (2014, p.417) reported how he used field notes to "maintain a distancing stance" from his participants when he felt that he was empathising too much with them. Although ethnographic research does not follow a positivist paradigm, De Costa's insight on field notes shows that they can be used to keep tabs on whether the researcher is going too far into lifeworlds of the participants and affecting the conclusions that are made. As Rampton, Maybin and Roberts (2016) suggest, ethnographers need to maintain the balance between the research participants and the research audience. This is part of the critical reflection and self-awareness field notes can bring to achieve trustworthiness in ethnographic studies. These ideas are important to my study to achieve a balance between understanding the lifeworlds of the focal students and ensuring the findings are useful to practitioners. Overall, though vital to this study, field notes were used to support data collected from the written reflections and interviews, and I prioritised student voice, especially in their own words, in the results.

### 3.6 Research design

To reflect the methodology, which sees dialogue as a way to reach plausible explanations of the participants' experiences (Denzin and Giardina, 2009), an exploratory-observational research design enabled participants to "interrogate their own dispositions and attitudes towards English, and seek a greater understanding of the historical-material conditions that

have shaped these feelings and perceptions” (Darvin, 2017, p306). Harvey (2015, p.24) suggests that it is the responsibility of the researcher to enable participants to “theorise their own experience”, and the methods adopted aimed to capture participants’ negotiated positions and perceptions across year 1 (Beinhoff and Rasinger, 2016). The reflective writing, interviews and mentoring sessions therefore aimed to help the participants articulate and explore their relationships with English, and this part of the transformational agenda of the research design. Through the mentoring and qualitative interviews, the research process was also designed to provide spaces for authentic communication so that the participants could enhance their English. The regular contact and investment in the participants aimed to ensure that they would benefit directly from the research and not feel that the research was being conducted ‘on them’. During the research, I positioned the participants as aspiring students (Rawal and De Costa, 2019) (rather than lower proficiency students) to ensure that the research did not negatively influence the participants.

### 3.7 Research stages

This research had two stages: a preliminary phase and the main study. Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest that preliminary research in a qualitative study explores and tests a wide range of themes. This is done because the researcher may not yet have an in-depth grasp of the issues that mean the most to the research participants. Gaining deep insights means interacting with the participants and reflects the idea that meaning is socially situated and constructed. Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest that researchers need to stay open and flexible in order to listen to the participants and understand the main themes. The themes that emerge during the initial stage will be used to focus the study aims for more specific and in-depth exploration. During this main stage, the cycle of data collection and analysis is ongoing and brings the researcher closer to reaching valid explanations and interpretations of specific themes. Data is built up and constructed from the perspectives and experiences of the participants; theories develop from the ground up and from the participants in their context. In interpretive research, theories largely develop from the situated views and experiences of the participants. The findings will then be positioned within existing research and related to wider theories and contexts.

#### 3.7.1 Preliminary study

A preliminary study was conducted from January to April 2019. The aim of the preliminary study was to explore my research area and identify the overarching themes which hold

meaning or tension for the participants. For this initial study, I reviewed medium of instruction policies and other relevant documents to gain a more in-depth picture of the local context. I also collected 17 reflective accounts, conducted three interviews and carried out a survey of 107 students. These students shared the same demographics and proficiency levels as the participants of the main study. The preliminary study informed the scope of the main study and was a chance to test out the data collection tools in terms of their applicability to the context and capacity to gain rich data. The results of the preliminary study are not discussed in this thesis.

### 3.7.2 Main study

Having grasped an idea of some of the major themes through the preliminary study, the main study was an in-depth investigation into a smaller number of students across their first year. The main stage (Figure 4) adopted an open and flexible approach by providing ample space for different lines of inquiry, but also became more targeted as the process evolved. For example, during Phases 2 and 3, I revisited some of themes identified in Phase 1 to observe changes in the participants' thinking. The main stage included reflective accounts, interviews and field notes as data gathering tools. Through these different research methods, I was able to triangulate the data. The use of field notes also facilitated a reflexive and open process which helped to guide the research. The main study followed a cycle of research activities which informed each other as the research developed. This cycle provided a robust space for participant-centred inquiry alongside my navigation into specific themes which aided the reporting of coherent findings.

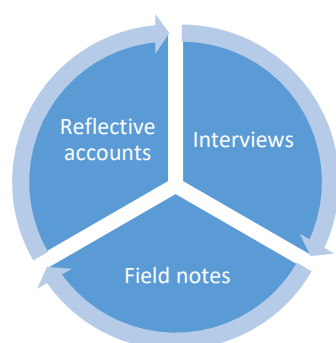


Figure 4: Main stage research cycle

### 3.8 Research site

This research was conducted at a publicly funded EMI university in Hong Kong. This university had 26,245 students and 5,256 staff during the year the research was conducted. The majority of students came from Hong Kong, with around 5,000 from Mainland China, Macau and Taiwan, and 900 from other countries. Locally, the university is well-known; however, despite respectable rankings (QS 100), the university is not generally seen as a top choice within Hong Kong.

The university has six faculties and two schools offering a range of degrees in science, engineering, business, and construction amongst other practical subjects. Most degree students complete a four-year programme which includes general and discipline requirements (see Table 2). General requirements aim to develop students' communication skills, professionalism and thinking abilities. Within this requirement, students need to take six credits of English and three credits of Chinese as part of a Language and Communication Requirement. The discipline requirement forms the major part of students' study aiming to build fundamental knowledge and professional competencies in their field. In terms of EMI, all students entering the university are required to take most subjects in English. The overall EMI model fits the 'concurrent support model' in which students receive ongoing language support in the form of EAP and ESP subjects, and additional support such as writing consultations embedded into specialist subjects (Macaro, 2018).

*Table 2: Bachelor degree structure*

General University Requirements (30 credits)	Major study (66-102 credits)	Minor study / free electives (18 credits)
Cluster Area Requirements (12 credits)	Common underpinning subjects	Minor study (18 credits)
Language and Communication Requirements (9 credits)	Discipline specific subjects	Free Electives
Freshman Seminar (3 credits)	Work-Integrated Education	
Leadership and Intra-personal Development (3 credits)	Capstone Projects	
Service Learning (3 credits)	Discipline language requirement (English) (2 credits)	

Healthy Lifestyle (0 credits)	Discipline language requirement (Chinese) (2 credits)	
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Some students also take higher diploma programmes (HD) lasting for two years. These programmes (see Table 3) have lower entry requirements and aim to prepare students for paraprofessional roles. Higher performing students can go on to enrol in a corresponding degree programme. Like the degree students, the HD students need to complete six credits of English to graduate.

*Table 3: Higher Diploma structure*

General University Requirements (15-18 credits)	Major study (42-57 credits)
Cluster Area Requirements (6 credits)	Discipline-specific subjects for Major study
Language and Communication Requirements (9 credits)	
Freshman Seminar (3 credits)	

Within the Faculty of Humanities is the English Centre (EC) (pseudonym). The EC's mission is to help students develop the academic English skills needed for EMI university study, and enhance their English and communication skills for their future careers. The centre offers credit bearing subjects in academic and professional English and organises other initiatives to enhance the English and communication skills of students. The non-credit bearing initiatives include workshops, speaking and writing consultations, reading groups and a drama club. The EC also offers a compulsory university wide writing consultation programme in which students gain written and face-to-face feedback on non-EC assignments. The EC teaches most students at the university with only a few gaining exemption or credit transfer. The largest academic English subject has 3,000+ students per academic year with almost 50 instructors teaching this one subject.

The most common pathway for students is to take two 3-credit language courses in their first year and one 2-credit course related to their discipline in year 3 (see Table 4). In year 1, students are streamed according to their secondary school English exam result. This determines which EC subjects they will take. The majority take an academic English course and an elective course but the students entering the university with lower scores must take a

proficiency course and then an academic English course. The students entering with the lower scores are the focal students of this study.

*Table 4: Common language subjects taken by 4-year students*

HKDSE English language score	Subject 1 (3 credits)	Subject 2 (3 credits)	Subject 3 (usually 2 credits)
4 or above	English for University Studies	Choice of four advanced electives	Discipline specific English language subject
3	Practical English for University Studies	English for University Studies	

During the year of the data collection, the university was hit with two crises. Firstly, Hong Kong was experiencing mass protests triggered by a proposed extradition law. During week 10 of semester 1 (November, 2019), protestors sought refuge at the university campus which was subsequently surrounded by police for 12 days. Face-to-face classes were suspended and the damage and amount of tear gas meant that it took a few weeks for the campus to be deemed safe for return. As the campus was being prepared for semester 2 and the return of students and staff, Covid-19 was gaining increased attention. This was the second crisis to hit the university and in January, 2020, the university announced that semester 2 classes would be provisionally held online. As Covid-19 caused increasing alarm during the early months of 2020, online teaching was extended to the entire semester. The unfolding political and health crises affected the experiences of the participants and these experiences have been documented in the results sections.

### 3.9 Research participants

10 first-year students taking either degree or higher diploma qualifications participated in the study (see Table 5). All participants attended local primary and secondary schools, and all had received a Level 3 (equivalent to IELTS 5.48-5.68; HKEAA, 2013) in their HKDSE English exam, which is the lowest general English entry level requirement at the focal university for Bachelor degrees. HKDSE levels range from 1 - 5, with 5\* and 5\*\* awarded to the top exam performers. In 2019, the year the participants took their HKDSE exams, 53.8% of day school candidates received a Level 3 or above for English, with 27.5% gaining a Level 4 or above, and 9.7% achieving a Level 5 or above (HKEAA, 2019). The results for the Chinese exam



were slightly higher with 57.9% receiving a Level 3 or above, 30.7% gaining a Level 4 or above, and 10.5% of day school candidates achieving a Level 5 or above (HKEAA, 2019).

All participants in this study spent their childhood in Hong Kong and stated that Cantonese was their first and home language. Two participants use Fujian to speak with grandparents and one participant occasionally speaks English with her mother. Most participants claimed that their parents' English level and educational attainment was low.

*Table 5: Research participants*

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Home language</b>	<b>Other languages</b>	<b>Parents' English level</b>
1	Zoe	Female	18	BA Fashion and Textiles	Cantonese	Mandarin	Low
2	Kara	Female	18		Cantonese / Fujian	Mandarin, Taiwanese	Low
3	Kyle	Male	18		Cantonese	Mandarin	Low
4	Marco	Male	18	Higher Diploma Building Technology and Management	Cantonese	Mandarin	Low
5	Anson	Male	18		Cantonese	Mandarin	Low
6	Leo	Male	18		Cantonese	Mandarin	Low
7	Jennifer	Female	18		Cantonese	Mandarin	
8	Daniel	Male	18	BEng Civil Engineering	Cantonese / Fujian	Mandarin	Low
9	Ryan	Male	18		Cantonese	Mandarin	Low
10	Christine	Female	18	BEng Logistics and Enterprise Engineering	Cantonese Sometimes English with mother	Mandarin, learning Japanese	Father low Mother speaks some English

*\* all names are pseudonyms*

### *Medium of instruction*

Participants started learning English formerly at primary school, although some said that they had learnt the ABCs and nursery rhymes in kindergarten. During the primary school years, participants received the majority of their classes in Cantonese and had English lessons most days. At junior secondary school, some participants attended English medium schools while

others went to Cantonese medium schools. Students used the terms EMI and CMI but a fine-tuning policy means that schools have more autonomy to decide the MOI for different classes (Poon and Lau, 2016). Admittance to secondary school is largely determined by exams taken at the end of primary school, with English medium schools generally being more preferred. Schools which accept higher banded students commonly state that their official MOI is English. The focal students continued with the same medium of instruction into the senior secondary forms; however two students, Zoe and Daniel, studied more subjects in Cantonese at senior secondary school. Participants of both EMI and CMI schools stated that teachers would speak Cantonese during the English classes; especially at senior secondary school when their teachers would explain exam strategies in Cantonese. Also, students reported that some subject teachers struggled with English and would switch between English and Cantonese. The table below therefore only gives a basic idea of the language of instruction, and the classroom reality is specific from class to class.

*Table 6: Medium of instruction experience of the participants*

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Kindergarten K1-K3</b>	<b>Primary P1-P6</b>	<b>Junior Secondary S1-S3</b>	<b>Senior Secondary S4-S6</b>	<b>University</b>
1	Zoe	Cantonese	Cantonese + daily English classes	Cantonese (50%) English (50%)	Cantonese (except English and maths)	English  + around 3 - 5 credits of Chinese
2	Kara			English	English	
3	Kyle			English	English	
4	Marco			Cantonese / some subjects in English	Cantonese / some subjects in English	
5	Anson			English	English	
6	Leo			English	English	
7	Jennifer			English	English	
8	Daniel			Cantonese (50%) English (50%)	Cantonese / some subjects in English	
9	Ryan			English	English	
10	Christine			Cantonese / some subjects in English	Cantonese / some subjects in English	

### 3.10 Procedures

#### 3.10.1 Research stages

Data were collected in three phases over the academic year (Table 7). Phase 1 was conducted during the first weeks of semester 1, Phase 2 was conducted up to the start of semester 2, and Phase 3 took place over the second semester and the beginning of the summer.

*Table 7: Data collection phases*

Phase 1	September - October 2019
Phase 2	October 2019 - February 2020
Phase 3	February 2020 - June 2020

Within these three phases, I collected written reflections, conducted interviews and keep a record of my thoughts and observations through written field notes. I held weekly academic mentoring sessions with the participants. Timings of data collection methods across the phases can be found in the table below.

*Table 8: Data collection phases and methods*

	Reflections	Interviews	Field notes	Mentoring
Phase 1	Sep - Oct 2019	Sep – Oct 2019	Sep - Oct 2019	Sep - Oct 2019
Phase 2	Jan - Feb 2020	Jan - Feb 2020	Oct 2019 - Feb 2020	Oct 2019 - Feb 2020
Phase 3	May - Jun 2020	May - Jun 2020	Feb - Jun 2020	Feb - Jun 2020

#### 3.10.2 Recruitment of participants

The target group for this study was HKDSE Level 3 students. These students are streamed according to their English school results and placed into a particular English subject. With the help of the subject leader of this English subject, I was able to identify classes, contact subject teachers and recruit students. Students attend these English classes with peers from their

discipline (e.g. civil engineering), I therefore considered this during recruitment so that I could attract students from different disciplines. The selection of participants is an example of purposive sampling in which a specific category of individual is chosen due to their unique insights into a phenomenon (Robinson, 2013).

Three teachers agreed to help me and during weeks 1 and 2 of semester 1, I went into their classes to introduce my research and the academic mentoring scheme. I especially highlighted that I welcomed students who had difficulties with English or did not like English so that I could attract a range of student perspectives. I then left contact slips which asked students their name, email address and whether they had completed their secondary schooling in Hong Kong. I did not collect these slips on the spot because I did not want students to feel pressure to complete them. The class teachers collected any completed slips after I had left the classroom and passed them onto me.

I went to six classes, each with around 20 students, and received 22 slips back. I then emailed each student with further details of the research and the academic mentoring and asked them to reply to me if they were still interested in joining. I was careful to say that I was only looking for around ten students. After this stage, 16 students got back to me. I was then able to select the final students based on gaining a range of participants from different disciplines and male and female students. Student interest was higher than expected and I accepted 12 participants. I felt that this would be a suitable balance allowing for participants who might drop out of the research and enabling deep enough interaction and commitment with each participant. This is in line with Robinson (2013) who summarises that 3-16 participants is common for single studies to enable the voices of participants. Students who I could not take on were referred to other academic mentors. I was aiming to have an equal number of male and female students but of the six female students who agreed to participate, two did not show up.

In selecting participants for this study, I aimed to balance sample homogeneity with sample heterogeneity. The more specific the sample criteria, the more homogenous the sample group (Robinson, 2013). In terms of gaining a homogeneous sample, participants were the same age, had grown up in Hong Kong and had been schooled in the same public educational system receiving the same grade for their English exam (HKDSE Level 3). In terms of gaining a heterogeneous sample, the participants were male and female, and were from different disciplines. They had also attended different schools (both EMI and CMI). Of the 16 students who volunteered (part of the homogeneous criteria), the final 12 students were selected on gaining more heterogeneity into the sample (i.e. gender and discipline). The sample is intended to be cautiously generalisable for similar students in the contextualised setting and

the results may resonate with researchers of EMI students at a similar language level in other settings.

A possible limitation of the sample group is that participants volunteered to join the research. This could cause self-selection bias in the results as the participants may have been more open and motivated about English (Robinson, 2013). However, to remedy this, I endeavoured to reach out to students who were less motivated with English when I presented the research in the different classes. It is therefore likely that the sample group has good representation of the wider cohort of students.

### *3.10.3 Data collection procedures*

Students were emailed instructions to complete the written reflections. The instructions gave participants an idea of what to write about but were left quite general so as not to restrict the research direction too much (see Appendix 4). For example, these were the first reflection instructions:

Thank you for sharing your thoughts in this reflection. Please write about your experiences of learning English before university, and your attitudes, feelings and hopes about English at university and for your future.

The second reflection asked students to reflect on their experiences with English at university during semester 1, and the third reflection asked students to reflect on their first year at university.

Students either wrote their reflections in the body of their email, attached a Word document, or handwrote their reflection (see Appendix 5 for an example). The reflections ranged in length from a few short paragraphs to 400-500 words. During Phase 3, the participants used an online form to complete their reflections.

Reflections were completed before the interviews for each stage of the research and this had three advantages. Firstly, the reflections helped to inform initial interview questions/topics. Secondly, I could ask participants to elaborate on their reflections during the interviews to gain deeper responses. Lastly, the participants went into the interviews having already thought about the themes of the research. This meant that participants were not starting each interview 'cold' which led to deeper exploration of the research themes.

During Phase 1, interviews took place in study rooms at the EC. These rooms were used for the mentoring sessions so participants were familiar with the site. During Phase 2, some interviews were conducted in nearby classrooms when the EC was temporarily closed as this part of the university was most affected by tear gas during the political crisis. Other interviews were conducted online due to Covid-19. During Phase 3, two interviews were conducted on campus and the rest were done online. Interview times were mutually agreed with participants and I was careful not to affect students' classes and study schedule. Interviews lasted between 31 minutes and 1 hour 9 minutes. I used the voice recorder on my phone to record the interviews and transferred the files onto my office computer after each interview, deleting the file from my phone (see Appendices 6 & 7 for example interview questions and a transcript).

One way in which my interviews can be demonstrated as being based in social practice is the way in which I positioned myself and interacted in the interviews. The basic interview stance fits with what Alby and Fatigante (2014, p.251) note as the 'norm of reciprocity in relationships'. This refers to how moral respect develops between speakers by revealing aspects of themselves to foster connections with others and build trust. When presenting myself to the participants and through the ongoing interactions, I was transparent about my aims for the study and my university position and personal identity. I shared my experiences from the 'teacher', 'foreigner', and 'resident' perspectives to show how my thinking had developed over the years and encourage discussion. By allowing participants to see into my world, I hoped that they might feel more comfortable showing me their worlds. I tried to carefully navigate this building of trust while maintaining and being transparent about my university role. I maintained that I was a teacher-researcher with a genuine goal to understand the student experience and enhance teaching and learning at the university. I also maintained my investment in the focal students and was careful not to lose their trust by being too focused on my research goals. The balance needed to be navigated and the weekly sessions helped in maintaining student investment in the research.

I was clear about the interview protocol. I felt that participants would have an image of what an interview was like which fitted neo-positivist conceptions more than interviews as a critical discussion. These pre-conceptions about the institution of the interview and the roles of interviewer and interviewee could, I felt, deter participants or limit their responses. I did not want interviewees to feel that the interviews were spaces purely for the extraction of their views for the benefit of the interviewer. When explaining the study to participants I spent time relaying how the interviews were more like discussions than a question/answer format and that the interviews were opportunities for them to develop their own awareness, critical thinking and language skills. On reflection, this was achieved more during phases 2 and 3 when rapport was very strong; the final interviews were much longer and more conversation-like.

### *3.10.4 Mentoring*

Though not a research method, the mentoring sessions were a vital component of the research design. The mentoring helped to realise the research aim of being immediately beneficial to the participants (e.g. through speaking practice, feedback and critical discussion on language learning). The building of rapport during the mentoring helped to gain students ongoing commitment to the research, enabled richer field notes, more fluid interviews and helped with member checking.

I chose to work with students on the mentoring scheme rather than students from my own classes. The benefit of this was that I could avoid certain ethical dilemmas, for example, not needing to give grades, and not needing to navigate teacher-student relationships whereby some students are part of the research and others are not. Galloway (2017), who reported her experiences of researching students, waited until after the course had finished before collecting data so as to avoid these types of ethical challenges. This was not an option for my study as I needed to work with students throughout the year. The mentoring scheme therefore gave me the option to work with students over the year without many of the ethical dilemmas associated with researching my own class students.

Mentoring in the study context is seen as the collaboration between EAP teacher (mentor) and student (mentee) with the purpose of encouraging, advising, and supporting the student through the transition to EMI at university (Kohnke and Jarvis, 2019). More widely, academic mentoring is described as a process of helping students to achieve academic, social and personal goals (Wilson, et al., 2012). The mentoring scheme at the focal university is aimed at providing an informal English experience for first-year students struggling with English. The scheme is advertised to students through briefings, emails and posters and there is a referral system for EAP teachers to recommend struggling students to the scheme. Participating students can also receive micro-credits which are embedded into their EAP subject. The scheme is not a proofreading service, and common activities include setting language learning goals, interpreting assignment instructions, facilitating informal interactions to build confidence, and offering feedback. Action research with 46 students on the scheme suggests that preparing for academic courses, practising academic English, and practising social English were the most useful aspects (Kohnke and Jarvis, 2019).

The timing of the mentoring sessions was arranged with the students after they had received their timetables. During each semester, I ran four sessions each week. Students attended one of the sessions (the same time each week) in groups of two or three. The sessions usually started with small talk; sometimes discussions continued for the whole session. Students often talked about their past schooling, their lecture experiences, and the shift to online learning, as

well as light-hearted topics such as travel and entertainment. As each semester progressed, the sessions turned more practical as students wanted advice related to their assignments. This especially included questions they had about referencing, academic language and assignment instructions and rubrics. At the end of each session, I usually asked the mentees what they would like to focus on the following week. In addition to the mentoring sessions, I had email interactions with the students.

Embedding the mentoring into the research design had the benefit of being able to work with the students throughout the year, build rapport and gain insider perspectives. This supports the constructivist and democratic approach to knowledge construction described earlier. However, this approach also meant that I needed to be careful about my positionality (discussed in section 11) and ethical implications (discussed in section 12).

### 3.11 Data analysis

#### 3.11.1 Data organisation

Data were organised into folders based around the three data collection phases. Within these three folders, files were put into folders for each data collection method (see Figure 5 below).

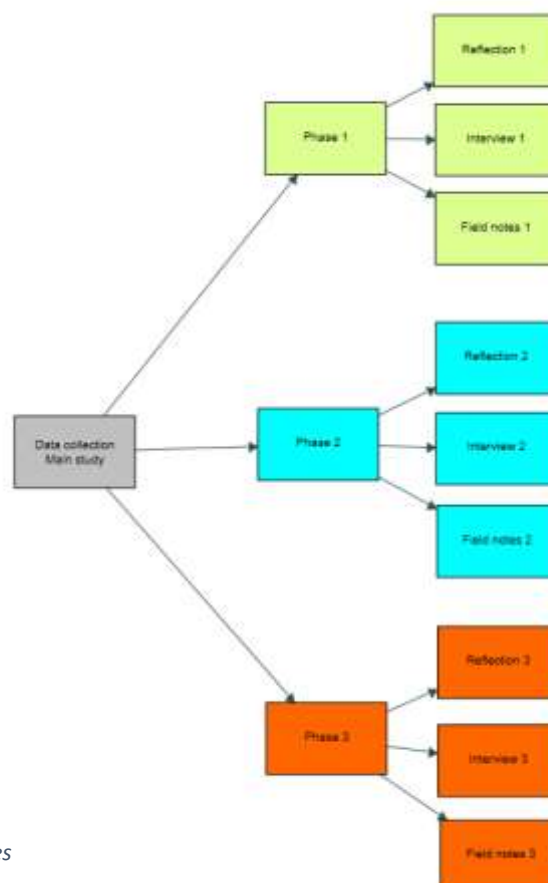


Figure 5: Organisation of data files



### *3.11.2 Phases of data analysis*

I analysed data from the reflections, interviews and field notes in three phases across the data collection period. This needed to be done because each stage of data collection helped to feed into the next stage. For example, the Phase 1 results helped to inform areas of focus for the Phase 2 data collection. One specific example is that many of the students felt frustrated with their English use at the start of university and I wanted to know if this was still the case as they progressed through their studies. I would not have been able to follow up on this theme if I had not analysed the Phase 1 data before commencing with Phase 2. I was wary not to restrict students by sticking too strictly to themes I had identified in the data. I therefore tried to keep the balance between enabling students to express new feelings, ideas and experiences throughout the data collection process, and at the same time trying to trace common themes across the entire year. I did this by keeping the focus of the reflections open and using the interviews to encourage students to elaborate on themes they had brought up in previous communication.

### *3.11.3 Interview transcription procedure*

I transcribed the interviews soon after they were conducted and this helped me to reflect on what was said and do some initial analysis while the interviews were still fresh in my mind. When transcribing, I listened to the whole interview to form an overall picture, I then transcribed the interviews word for word, including false starts, hesitations and crosstalk. I did not correct grammar errors. While transcribing, I made analytic memos of key points which would form the beginnings of the coding process. I listened to the interviews again to ensure that the transcriptions were accurate. Finally, I re-read the transcripts and wrote a summary of each interview which I sent to students for member checking (Nowell, et al., 2017). 30 interviews totalling more than 21 hours were transcribed.

### *3.11.4 Thematic analysis*

In this study, I used thematic analysis to analyse the data collected from the written reflections, interviews and field notes. Thematic analysis is an active process that enables researchers to identify and analyse patterns in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach to analysing the data was adopted meaning that codes were not decided before the analysis. The codes, and themes that subsequently formed, were strongly tied to the data (Nowell, et al., 2017) in a process of coding and recoding. I adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps to

thematic analysis which is a recursive process of getting familiar with the data, through to generating, reviewing and defining codes, with the last stage being the write up. While doing thematic analysis I kept analytic memos (totalling 1,933 words) which are logs of coding decisions made and reflections on the emerging themes. Analytic memos help to give transparency to the data analysis process (Corbin and Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2013). I also took screenshots of the codes which gave a visual representation of how codes were evolving.

I used NVivo (v12) for the data analysis. This software complimented the coding steps I took as it was easy to copy extracts from the full transcripts, move extracts around, and code and recode the themes and sub-themes. NVivo also allows for the creation of concept maps which help to visually look at the data. This was particularly useful for assessing the links between themes.

A code encapsulates something explicit and meaningful about the data. I was especially interested in what Saldaña (2013) refers to as values coding, where codes are applied to values, attitudes and beliefs. I also captured experiences and stories which served as illustrations of the values and emotions of the students. Some codes covered too much and needed to be separated, these codes became 'parent nodes' in NVivo and some evolved into themes. Other codes overlapped, and were merged into one theme. This was the basic process of coding and recoding that I adopted when doing the data analysis. It could be referred to as open coding, a coding process where codes are not pre-determined but modified (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017).

A theme "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.82). Themes are "significant concepts that link substantial portions of the data together" (Nowell, et al., 2017, p.8). I found that some themes emerged very clearly while others took much working and reworking in order to capture their essence. This process moved beyond the labelling and summarising of themes to understanding and interpreting the underlying meanings they expressed (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). When conducting the data analysis, I devised my own criteria to determine the themes. Of note, I considered the following when forming themes:

1. the number of data extracts and recurrence of themes;
2. the spread of data extracts across participants (i.e. how many of the students contributed to this theme);
3. the spread across data types (i.e. whether interview data supported data from the reflections);
4. the reoccurrence or development of themes across time;

5. whether a theme was self-initiated (i.e. not prompted by the researcher);
6. the emotion expressed in the data extracts (i.e. how impassioned the extract was / how strong the sentiment was across students).

To enhance the rigour of the thematic analysis, I used the trustworthiness criteria presented by Nowell, et al. (2017). Nowell and colleagues (2017) outline trustworthiness criteria based around concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, auditability and reflexivity. I have adapted the table below from Nowell, et al.'s article to demonstrate how I endeavoured to give rigour to the thematic analysis in my study.

*Table 9: Establishing trustworthiness during each stage of thematic analysis*

*(Adapted from Nowell, et al. (2017))*

<b>Phases of Thematic Analysis</b>  Braun and Clarke (2006)	<b>Means of establishing trustworthiness</b>  Adapted from Nowell, et al. (2017)	<b>Evidence in my study</b>
<b>Phase 1:</b> Familiarising yourself with the data	Prolong engagement with the data	Transcription and repeated reading of data / reading whole data set before coding
	Triangulate different data collection modes	Used reflections, interviews and field notes in analysis
	Document thoughts about potential codes/themes	Wrote analytic memos about coding decisions and emerging themes
	Store raw data in well-organised archives	Organised files chronologically and by participant and data collection method
<b>Phase 2:</b> Generating initial codes	Reflexive journaling	Coding decisions recorded as analytic memos
	Use of a coding framework	Used an inductive approach of open coding and values coding

	Audit trail of coding generation	Conducted via analytic memos and screenshots
<b>Phase 3:</b> Searching for themes	Diagramming to make sense of theme connections	Made use of NVivo concept maps
	Keep detailed notes about development and hierarchies of concepts and themes	Through analytic memos and capturing screenshots of emerging themes on NVivo
<b>Phase 4:</b> Reviewing themes	Review the coherence of themes and subthemes	Worked through each theme through a process of refinement and realignment
	Review the spread and depth of extracts	Data represented from all participants. Recorded which themes had the most extracts from the widest spread of participants.
	Test for referential adequacy by returning to raw data	Referred back to data extracts in full transcripts to ensure accuracy of theme representation
	Ensure data supports themes	Went through each data extract to ensure it fitted the theme / or moved extracts to other nodes
<b>Phase 5:</b> Defining and naming themes	Final checking of themes	Reviewed final themes for each phase and at the end of the data collection process. Checked for coherence across data collection phases.
	Researcher triangulation	Findings shared with supervisors for critical comment
	Documentation of theme naming	Audit trail from analytic memos and conceptual maps
	Member checking	Discussed accuracy of themes with participants during mentoring sessions; wrote summaries of

<b>Phase 6:</b> Producing the report		interviews and asked participants to verify them
	Peer debriefing	Shared themes in a research seminar and a linguistics symposium
	Describing the coding, analysis and context	Described in this document

### 3.11.5 Member checking

Member checking is conducted to help produce accurate and credible findings (Creswell, 2013). Member checking provides opportunities for research participants to confirm, check, challenge and reassess their contributions (Doyle, 2007). The member checking process includes not only the accuracy of what was said (through transcripts or summaries) but also what was meant (by showing emerging themes). The process therefore includes checking the researcher's interpretation of the data. Harvey (2015, p.25) suggests that member checking is part of a qualitative research design which is "holistic, relational and agentic". This means that the ideas produced through the research are circulated enabling more opportunities for participants to clarify their position and take some authority over the research process. Member checking should not be used by researchers to put forward hypotheses which do not accurately reflect the data, and to seek support for these false hypotheses from participants. Member checking therefore holds ethical implications, firstly to involve participants in the accuracy and interpretation of data, this is part of a respectful and democratic approach to research. Secondly, to not abuse the member checking process by seeking support for distorted claims in an attempt to provide richer or better fitting data.

My member checking processes evolved through the research. During Phase 1, I wrote summaries of the interviews for each participant, but I noticed later that these summaries did not include much interpretation. This was a wasted opportunity to test out the themes. Subsequently, the summaries for the final two phases also contained some working ideas about the themes that were arising. The summaries were sent to participants within two weeks of the interviews while they were still fresh in the minds of the participants.

For each phase, I asked students to check the summaries and provide feedback of any inaccuracies or points that did not represent their views. This was conducted through email and I briefly explained that my methodology involved asking students to check if the

summaries were accurate. I did this to raise their awareness about the research process and their impact. I did not provide the full transcripts because I did not think the students would read them. I also read about Carlson's (2010) experiences of member checking in which some of her participants were appalled by their own English in the transcripts and either corrected the grammar, left the research in shame, or wanted to redo the interviews. I wanted to avoid bringing embarrassment to the learners and potentially reducing their commitment to the research.

I used the mentoring sessions to informally discuss common themes. I explained that I had some working hypotheses that I wanted to run by the students, and that I would not be mentioning names or quotes. We then discussed the themes that were arising and I gave students opportunities to comment. For example, I would invite comments by saying 'does this reflect your experience?' or 'is this true for you?' and 'to what extent do you agree or disagree with these ideas?'. I found that this provided an engaging topic for the mentoring sessions and the students were interested to see what types of conclusions I was making. This approach complimented the individual summaries I sent to the students and produced more comments. Overall, the themes held up and comments tended to be further elaboration on these themes. For example, on the theme of the difference in learning style from secondary school to university, one student offered further anecdotes of how she found group work challenging.

### 3.12 Researcher positionality

According to Wei (2019, p.158), an ethnography is a "subjective interpretation of what the ethnographer has been able to observe". Wei suggests that although ethnographies prioritise participant voices, they will always be "mediated by the ethnographer" (p.158). Objectivity may not be realistic or even desirable in ethnographies, but transparency can be achieved. Within dialogue-based research, it is crucial to acknowledge power imbalances and their impact on the conversation (Rolland, Dewaele and Costa, 2019). As a male, Western teacher/researcher in an Asian context, my own values and biases must have influenced my lines of inquiry and my interpretations of the participants' responses. Throughout the research, I tried to take an open, non-judgemental stance and respond encouragingly to new ideas and lines of inquiry initiated by the participants. The mentoring sessions helped to create an informal space in which participants could share their views comfortably. I avoided positioning myself as a friend to the participants and retained a mentor/teacher/researcher persona. This was a line that needed to be carefully navigated as I found that the mentor/mentee relationship is closer than the teacher/student relationship. During the research, I tried to question and challenge my

assumptions to avoid my identity claims clouding the research. For example, in understanding the exam-based culture in Hong Kong, it is necessary to understand that examinations have been a long-standing route out of poverty in China and are associated with family honour. I therefore needed to question my judgements of the exam system in Hong Kong.

In terms of being a Western researcher, McKinley (2016), who conducted his PhD study in Japan, suggests that objectivity and taking the cultural perspective of the researcher out of the research process is not a very achievable aim in educational research, especially in studies where the researcher does not share the same culture as the participants. McKinley encourages researchers to see subjectivity not as a limitation but as “pivotal” and a “clear perspective” (McKinley, 2016, p.37). McKinley is saying that we should explore our beliefs and attitudes and the effects these have on the collection and interpretation of data. McKinley concluded that being a Westerner did not have an advantage or a disadvantage in his research. More important was to “allow the ‘positionality’ of the Western researcher and the Japanese university student to *inform* the research” [emphasis in original] (McKinley, 2016, p.44). It was clear that the participants viewed me as a Westerner, but having spent half of my life in Asia, they were also amused at the ‘Asian values’ I had taken on board. When conducting the research, I reflected that my values had been influenced by the synergies, tendencies and antagonisms between ‘Western’ and ‘Asian’ culture.

### 3.13 Ethical considerations

This study received ethical approval before data collection commenced (see Appendix 1). I received the written consent of the Head of the English Centre at the focal university. I also received consent from the subject leader of the course in which I would recruit students.

I followed the procedures as set out in my research ethics application form. For example, I explained the research aims and approach to the students before they signed the consent form. I included details about how the results would be used, stored and anonymised, and that students could leave the research project at any time. I informed the participating students that their views would not be shared with their departments or affect their grades in their English subjects (see Appendices 2 & 3).

As well as following the university’s macro-ethical procedures, I needed to carefully consider the microethics of my research practice (Kubanyiova, 2008). As explained by Kubanyiova (2008), microethics is a focus on the care and responsibility of the participants and includes the researcher’s ability to take a reflexive stance in dealing with ethical dilemmas as they arise. As my research is locally situated, certain ‘ethically important moments’ (Guillemin and Gillam,

2004) arose which could not be anticipated via the macro-ethical procedures. By taking a reflexive approach, I was better able to predict, notice and respond appropriately to research dilemmas that came up (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004).

In Section 3.12, I analysed my positioning within the research. Political positioning/stance was also a tricky issue to navigate and posed ethical dilemmas. At the time of data collection, Hong Kong was experiencing mass protests triggered by a proposed extradition law and later included other issues such as the right to vote and police accountability. The protests received international news coverage and there was a very charged atmosphere in Hong Kong. Due to the complexity of identities of people in Hong Kong, who have migrated from China at different times, and potentially have strong pro or anti Central Government stances, I needed to be careful about my political views. As the political situation in Hong Kong is so divisive, I did not openly disclose my political stance to the participants and I prepared for scenarios in which they pushed for an opinion. This was tricky because I did not want to lose rapport by not acknowledging the difficult and painful situation for young people. Overall, the students did not ask me directly about my stance on the movement and I tried to give the sense that I cared deeply for Hong Kong's future and the prospects of young people. Some students brought up the political issues in interviews, and I tried to listen openly, and reaffirm that all data was anonymous and that I could delete any parts of the interviews. Other students did not seem to want to discuss the political situation. The controversial National Security Law was brought in just after the end of data collection.

Care of duty for the participants during the campus closure and when Covid-19 struck was also an important ethical consideration. As the events were unfolding and the campus closed, I needed to maintain contact with the participants and ensure that I did not lose trust by prioritising the research over their wellbeing. I did this by keeping an open and friendly tone and showing concern about the situation. I gave the participants chances to take a break from the mentoring, but they wanted to continue. I think that as the participants did not have an English network, they valued the contact in English, especially during the times when they were not attending the campus. During semester 2, the mentoring sessions were conducted online but attendance was very high (90-100%). The language support and space for English conversation appeared to be valued by the students.

### 3.14 Summary

This study is a collaborative investigation which sees the participants as co-constructors of knowledge. The research is designed to benefit the participants and produce socially-



responsible and authentic findings. Written reflections and qualitative interviews were used as data-collection tools, alongside field notes. Mentoring featured as a way to build rapport and invest in the participants, paving the way for more fluid interviews. The research was conducted at an EMI university in Hong Kong and ten first-year students volunteered to join. During a tumultuous year, the research posed practical and ethical challenges which were navigated through open communication with the participants and taking a reflexive approach.

## CHAPTER 4 *Results: Phase 1*

### 4.1 Introduction

The Phase 1 data collection was conducted in late September and early October 2019. The students were in their third or fourth weeks of university when I interviewed them. All ten interviews were conducted at the English Centre which has a large resource area for students and small meeting rooms. The students were becoming familiar with this location through the mentoring sessions which began in week 3 of the semester. During these early mentoring sessions, the participants appeared “keen” and “wanted to enhance their speaking and communication skills” (Field notes 1). I had conducted at least one mentoring session with the students before the interviews and had been in touch with them via email from week 1 after visiting their classes. The main focus of the interviews was to learn about the language learning histories of the students and their views about English at the start of university.

### 4.2 Themes overview

Using thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, written reflections and my field notes, the data revealed six main themes (see Figure 6). These six themes are divided into two main sections ‘Background’ and ‘University’ and the data shows that the students’ background and early experiences of English impacted them as they began university. Students reflected that their family backgrounds and the lack of authentic opportunities with English had disadvantaged them in childhood (Theme 1: Disadvantage). Adding to this, the test-oriented learning style during their schooling caused stress and a lack of affinity with English (Theme 2: Distance). The distance these students felt from English resulted in them developing negative emotions and insecurity about their English ability (Theme 3: Insecurity). This insecurity was carried into university where the focal students positioned themselves as low proficiency English users (Theme 4: Deficit). However, the students held strong views on the importance of English and that investment in the language would bring rewards (Theme 5: Promise). They were hopeful and positive about the prospect of enhancing their English in new and authentic ways, including meeting international students (Theme 6: Hope). The following sections will describe and analyse each theme using extracts from the data set for Phase 1. Finally, I will show connections between the themes and finish with a table which summarises the themes with illustrative quotes.

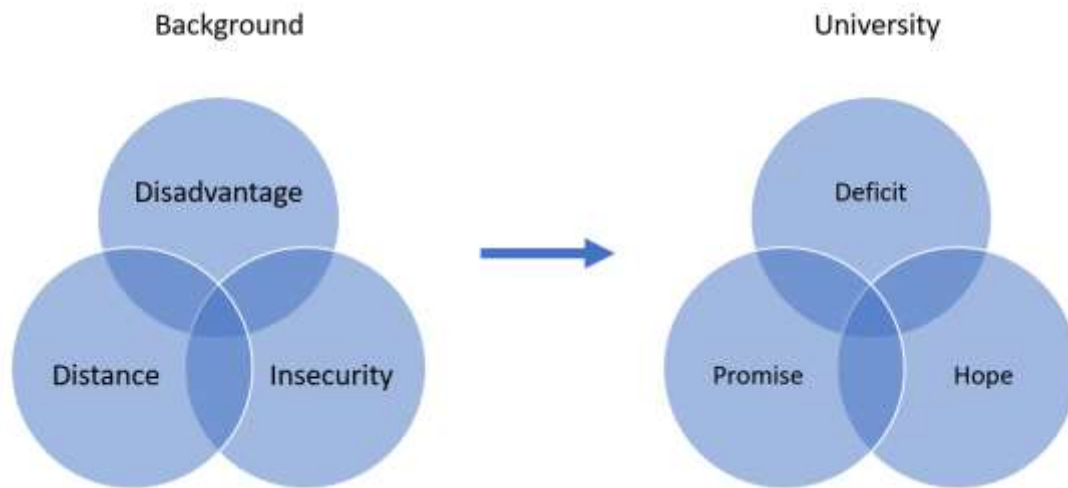


Figure 6: Main themes from Phase 1

## Part 1: Background

### 4.3 Theme 1: Disadvantage

This theme represents the disadvantage these students felt because they lacked opportunities with English in their childhoods. Disadvantage is defined as the perceived unfavourable circumstances or conditions that lessened the participants' chances of success with English. Students felt disadvantaged when they compared themselves to other students who had a more conducive home environment for developing skills and confidence in English.

#### *4.3.1 The students felt disadvantaged because their families could not support their English development from an early age*

The students described barriers which they felt hindered their English language development throughout their childhood. Many thought that their family background disadvantaged them. For example, all but one of the students said that their parents could not speak much English and could not help them with their studies. Leo (Interview 1), for one, was not sure if his parents had graduated from secondary school and said that his "*parents are not so good at English*". A major reason for the disadvantage these students felt was that their parents could not help them with their homework. Hong Kong children in state schools receive a high homework load and keeping up with studies is essential for progression. Not having this home support with English study most likely caused additional time and stress for these students in completing their homework. Another reason for the feelings of disadvantage was the lack of English as a

social language at home. In Hong Kong, it is common for English-proficient parents to speak English with their children and read English books to them. The focal students reported not having these types of informal experiences at home and saw this as a disadvantage for their English exposure and development. Anson (Interview 1), reported that his parents could not help him with English *“because they do not have a good academic background before. So, they don’t know English very well. We always talk in Cantonese only”*. Similarly, Daniel, reflected that his *“family is low educated. At home, they always speak Cantonese and Fujianese”*.

#### *4.3.2 Most students felt disadvantaged because they did not attend an English kindergarten*

In Hong Kong, parents often prefer English or bilingual kindergartens to Cantonese kindergartens. The main reason for this is because they would like their children to gain exposure of English from an early age. Most of the focal students did not attend English kindergartens. Anson felt disadvantaged by not having this early English experience and when he started learning English formally at primary school, he already felt behind. Below, he expresses that the lack of opportunity caused him to *“hate”* English in early childhood. This demonstrates how early learning experiences can set a trajectory with English.

*Some of them have some English lesson in kindergarten they always see their fluent teacher. So, they taught English in small age, but I don’t think we have this chance. Thanks to my primary school, this terrible experience, I hate English in that moment.*

Anson – Interview 1

Like Anson, Ryan, below, anguishes over the lack of opportunity in early life. He asserts that more privileged students can *“feel”* English via their early learning experiences and environment. Ryan connects this lack of feel for English to a lack of interest. This suggests that there is a dislocation with English for Ryan, which was caused by his home and early schooling experiences. Below he refers to *“us”* (*“it’s difficult for some of us”*) which suggests he is identifying with other students from a low socio-economic background. For Ryan, it was not until form 5 until he realised the importance of English and by then it was difficult to *“catch up”*. The extract below highlights how Ryan feels disadvantaged from his lack of early *“contact”*

with English and identifies himself with other students with limited English experiences in early life.

**Ryan:** *All of my friends that they don't really like English. I really like English-*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Ryan:** *- because they're not interested in it at all -*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Ryan:** *- because it's very difficult for some of us. It is very easy for some students because I know ... I know that some students in Hong Kong they start to learn English in their kindergarten.*

**Andrew:** *Mm-hmm.*

**Ryan:** *And their parents speak English at homes.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Ryan:** *And they can just feel this environment, feel this English since they're young.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Ryan:** *Through the contact with English very, um ... and it's ... I think it's possible, the best ways to learn English when you're just a little kid.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah, yeah.*

**Ryan:** *And because I think when I start to learn English seriously-*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Ryan:** *- is in form five. So, I think it's quite late, so it's very difficult for me to catch up. So, I think it's very difficult to find it interesting.*

Ryan - Interview 1

#### 4.3.3 Some students felt held back by financial constraints

Though three students said that their parents paid for tutorial classes to support their English, I gained the impression that some of the focal students experienced financial barriers to enhancing English in childhood. Kara, below, expresses how she daydreamed about having the money (*"if I have money"*) to go overseas on an exchange trip. She relates going to a foreign country as being 'surrounded' by an English environment and being 'pushed' to speak. This brings further evidence to the finding that these students have not experienced an English environment where they can develop their skills in informal or social ways. In Kara's case, socio-economic status appears to have been a barrier to English enhancement because her desired experience to go on exchange was held back by her family's finances.

*But I, when I was even secondary school I think if I have money and I want to go to exchange. I think when you go to, um, like, go to other country and then the people surrounding you is all speaking English, is, they can push you to speak English. And then you just listen a lot, every day, which can push you. Because I have friend, she just came back to Hong Kong and then he, she has experience. She live in America before, so her English is, is really good.*

Kara – Interview 1

#### 4.3.4 Theme 1 summary

The students felt disadvantaged by their home life which did not give them a head start with English. Most of the students stated that their parents could not speak English and this meant that they could not receive help with their studies. Students also felt disadvantaged because their parents could not speak with them in English; a common method used by Hong Kong parents to acclimatise their children to English. Some students positioned themselves as having fewer opportunities than others who were able to go to English kindergartens and exchange trips.

#### 4.4 Theme 2: Distance

Theme 1 captured the sense of disadvantage the students felt because their family background hindered their opportunities with English. Theme 2 focusses on the way English was taught in their schools. The focal students frequently referred to a test-based system which caused stress and frustration with English. Theme 2 captures the sense of distance or dislocation students felt from English because of the way it was taught. Distance refers to the closeness or affinity the students felt with English, i.e. whether they saw English as part of their linguistic repertoire or an isolated school subject; and whether they saw English as something useful in their everyday lives. This theme relates to the lack of authentic experiences in English the students had at school and this was compounded by the minimal opportunities in their home lives.

The exam-focused teaching approach at school negatively affected the students' English development. All students were clear and critical in their views about how they learnt English throughout their schooling, from primary years to senior secondary forms. The main criticism was the focus on test preparation which left little opportunity for authentic learning experiences. Students referred to "*spoon-feeding*" (Anson, Interview 1, Christine, Reflection 1), "*copying*" (Anson, Interview 1), "*memorising*" (Daniel, Interview 1), learning from "*listening*" to teachers (Zoe, Interview 1, Daniel, Reflection1) and a focus on completing past exam papers (All). Students saw this approach as being "*passive*" (Ryan, Interview 1) "*traditional*" (Kyle, Interview 1). "*frustrating*" (Daniel, Interview 1), "*not motivating*" (Leo, Interview 1), "*not useful*" (Leo, Interview 1) and "*not real learning*" (Christine, Interview 1). Overall, this approach caused the students to feel frustrated, and distant from English.

##### *4.4.1 The learning approach at primary school did not enable the students to connect with English*

Primary school was the start of the formal English learning journey for most of the students. From the interviews, reflections and mentoring sessions, it is evident that students held negative perceptions about the teaching style at primary school. For example, below, Anson is critical of the test-taking and grammar-intensive approach which led to feeling of "*hate*". This feeling of hate arose from the focus on following examples and having to "*copy, copy and copy*".

*In primary school, I always do the paper. Always do a paper and some grammar, I don't really understand how to use but we just follow the example and copy, copy, and copy. So, I hate doing it.*

Anson - Interview 1

Similarly, Zoe viewed her English learning experiences at primary school negatively. In the quote below, Zoe is critical of the passive and teacher-fronted lessons which left little opportunity for speaking practice. Zoe expressed that this teaching style is “*not a good system for learning English*”.

*At primary school, learning English is not, um, I think is not a perfect system for learning English, because a lot of people sitting in a classroom and one teacher just only asking questions about the vocabulary. And sometimes, maybe I raise our hands and teacher didn't pick me. I just can't answer a question. I think just learning vocabulary and ... didn't take me to answer questions. It's not a good system for learning English.*

Zoe – Interview 1

From the mentoring sessions, it was clear that students did not get to use English much at primary school; the focus was on teaching English as an academic subject rather than a skill related to their lives. The findings suggest that early schooling English experiences had an impact on the students' emotions and learning habits and from early on, these students did not have opportunities to use English in authentic or fun ways. This contributed to the sense of distance these students felt from English.

#### *4.4.2 Some students reported less pressure in learning English at junior secondary school*

The students had differing experiences and opportunities at junior secondary school. Leo recalled that “*junior secondary school life is better. I can use some of the English uh, for communication*” (Interview 1). Jennifer reported that there was “*more opportunity*” at junior secondary school but students were reluctant to speak English. Both Leo and Jennifer



attended EMI junior secondary schools. Ken attended a traditionally CMI junior secondary school and said that *"I don't think the way can improve my English very well"* (Interview 1). Christine also attended a traditionally CMI school but reported positive English learning experiences. It appears that there was less pressure at junior secondary school and this is probably because the students had taken a high-stakes exam at the end of primary school and the HKDSE exams were a few years ahead of them.

#### *4.4.3 The senior secondary years particularly created negative emotions and distance from English*

The senior secondary years appeared to be the most *"frustrating"* (Daniel, Interview 1), *"limited"* (Ryan, Interview 1) and *"difficult"* (Leo, Interview 1) for these participants. All interviewees lamented the teaching approach as focused on exam preparation. Daniel, below, recalls how the focus on exam skills and 'memorisation' led to him feeling *"frustrated"*.

*In the secondary school, my teachers need to, need to teach you the exam skills and exam strategies. He always says, "You need to memorize. Memorize this. It's very important in order to get an achievement in HKDSE." He always say this. When he say too much, and he say, when he say, this kind of sentence, many times I feel frustrated on this.*

Daniel - Interview 1

Leo recollects a similar experience. In the following extract he mentions how this exam-strategy approach comes at the cost of *"learning"*. Leo's frustration comes through as he felt that *"everything you do is just prepare for DSE"*. Leo is suggesting that the distance created with English came from this focus on exams which he appears to view as not 'learning'.

*Because yeah, we keep doing exercise, keep doing, keep practicing. And-and yeah - yeah I've been after getting into the seniors form, yeah, everything -everything that you do is just prepare for DSE, not learning.*

Leo - Interview 1

Like Leo, Kara also relates the exam-oriented approach as restricted to meeting a requirement. In the quote below she expresses her frustration of wanting to learn for the sake of learning and through “*normal talking*”. Kara emotionally reflects that learning English in this way “*destroyed [her] life*”.

*So, I want to learn, but in the secondary school English, er. I think English is really, like destroyed my life I think, because I have a lot of test and then I need to meet the requirement, so it's really hard. I just want to learn, like, normal talking, but not for the examination.*

Kara - Interview 1

The extract below further confirms the frustration students had with the test-focused learning approach. Christine found that this approach was “*not real learning*” and reduced opportunities for speaking.

*I found that there is less opportunity to read, speak English, and write English in the senior form, because just like a lot of time you're going to keep doing the past paper, and it's not real learning. It's just like doing some assignment or, or exercise.*

Christine - Interview 1

Participants showed a longing for a more communicative style of learning English and the lack of speaking opportunities was a common criticism of the teaching style. For example, Leo below thought that a greater focus on speaking would be “*better*”. The lack of speaking opportunities may have contributed to the distance these students felt with English because they were not connecting socially through the language.

*I think, in my opinion, I like to speak, instead of writing English. Yes. But, when you are doing the paper you have write lots of English and listen and, I don't need to say anything well when doing the paper. But if I can speak more English, it's more, it's better.*

Leo - Interview 1

Anson also wants to learn English in an “*informal*” way and “*for communication*”. Below he implies that his learning was only for the sake of exams and not for his personal development. It is possible that this situation created a sense of dislocation with English in these students as they learnt for an external goal and did not gain a sense of enrichment from the process.

*I think we should learn English in some informal way just for communication is okay. Not just use some academic words to show your English level in the exam to let the examiner know you as better in English.*

Anson - Interview 1

Below, Leo is clear on the reason for the exam-oriented approach and states that it is for the purpose of gaining entry to university and going on to secure employment. It is evident in the extract that Leo sees that he is in a competition-based environment and relates this to being “*judged*”. He feels that if students receive low marks, they are seen “*nothing*”. This suggests that the exam-based learning approach affects the self-perception of students and their confidence and identity with English.

**Andrew:** *Okay, why do you think there's so much like pressure to like pass the DSE?*

**Leo:** *Yeah. Uh, the some reason I think the main reason is because for the, for the future for the career path I think so, I need to the people think, or I need to, I need to get a high marks in DSE, so I can get into a good university -*

**Andrew:** *Mm-hmm.*

**Leo:** *- and have, have a studying in the ... in the in some professional subject and I can - yeah, after I graduated from university, I can get into my uh, not -not dream job, but I think a good-good quality of job.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Leo:** *- Uh, everything we have think that, everything I we did that. But yeah. Another reason for the stress is because, uh, um, yeah, people -people usually they - they treat the - uh, they treat the result of your ... of your DSE - No, I ... I think ... I don't think it's because - Ah, how can I say? Of your academic result.*

**Andrew:** *Mm-hmm.*

**Leo:** *Yeah, people treat very important. Yeah, they will think like that is if you get lower mark in the subject, in the exam, then you are nothing. Yeah, in Hong Kong -*

**Andrew:** *Okay.*

**Leo:** *- in Chinese culture, okay.*

**Andrew:** *So, they judge you based on your academic results?*

**Leo:** *Your - So you will seem so weak in other people -*

**Andrew:** *Mm-hmm.*

**Leo:** *- in other people minds. So you need to get high mark in order to prove yourself to others.*

Leo - Interview 1

To bring further evidence to the theme of distance, Jennifer feels that she cannot apply her English to everyday situations. Despite her efforts, Jennifer still feels that her English is “*poor*” and this is part of what created distance: student effort with English was not rewarded with communicative competency. This confirms the sense I gained from the students during the interviews and mentoring sessions that the learning style at school had created distance between the participants and English. Learning solely for the exam had limited their chances to enjoy and speak English.

I seldom speak in English. At the same time, I only learn a lot exam skills in order to achieve a higher mark in DSE. However, I realise that my level of English is so poor when apply on daily life.

Jennifer – Reflection 1

#### 4.4.4 Theme 2 summary

Overall, these students were very critical of the way they had learnt English throughout their schooling. The focus on testing and the grammar-intensive approach had reduced their opportunities to speak and develop a connection with English. This struggle in learning English began at primary school, and the senior secondary years were particularly stressful for these students. They reported feeling frustrated and that they had not experienced 'real' learning. This compounded a feeling of distance the students felt from English.

#### 4.5 Theme 3: Insecurity

The lack of opportunities at home and school to build confidence informally with English and the stressful test-based teaching approach caused a range of negative emotions in the students. Overall, this can be described as a feeling of insecurity about English. Insecurity is defined here as the feeling that one cannot succeed, the lack of confidence to try, and the negative feelings and low self-perceptions that accompany repeated knock downs.

##### 4.5.1 Students' past learning experiences resulted in a feeling of insecurity with English

The students expressed a range of negative feelings about learning English at various times in their schooling. These feelings turned into low self-perceptions including a lack of confidence and social embarrassment with their English. The students expressed strong feelings such as being "*depressed*" (Kyle, Interview 1), "*bored and stressed*" (Daniel, Reflection 1), "*hating English*" and "*having a terrible time*" (Anson, Reflection 1). Zoe, below, reports being "*scared*" of English at school which caused her to "*reject*" her English studies.

Before coming to university, actually I had a period of time, felt scared of studying English. In which, I reject to learn and listen my English related material.

Zoe – Reflection 1

The level of emotion was strong among the students and they especially related these feelings to the learning style at school. For example, like Zoe, Kara reported feeling “scared” of English and this was because of the test-oriented approach: “*I always failed my English subject in the secondary school which make me felt depressed and scared to learn English*” (Kara, Interview 1). Similarly, Kyle (Interview 1) recalls below how the traditional approach to learning English highlighted his weaknesses which led him to feel depressed. He relates this to students ‘like him’, who do “*not have a good beginning in English*”. The background and early learning experiences of these students set them on a trajectory which later led them to struggle with English and hold negative self-perceptions.

**Andrew:** *But the DSE ... you said, forced you to learn... It forced you to use more English, so is that not a good thing?*

**Kyle:** *I think, just it give me a purpose of noticing me, my English is poor and I need to err improve it to, in order to get a high marks. But I think the err the traditional learning system is not good for learning a language. Just even can't get a good mark in the test I thought. Just someone just like us, English is not in a good level, not have a good beginning in English. And the daily system will make us depressed erm as it just come from jump to a very high level to learn. And I think we should start on erm having conversation with each other instead of doing a lot of practice, to writing er paragraphs, something like that.*

Kyle - Interview 1

Anson, below, recalls the difficulties of being in a new environment where he could not understand the teacher. It was reported earlier that Anson did not have a home or kindergarten experience that supported English learning. Anson’s inability to adapt to English classes at primary school was likely due to this lack of experience of English in early life. This is one

example of how these students' early experiences set a trajectory that did not result in high achievement with English.

*First start is my primary school, around seven or eight years old. But I got a terrible experience learning English before. It's quite difficult to me because I don't understand what the teachers say and lack of some vocabularies. So, I don't really understand some readings so I always fail in my exam.*

Anson – Interview 1

#### 4.5.2 Theme 3 summary

The disadvantage and distance from English these students experienced set them on a trajectory of low self-esteem with English. The test-based schooling system and constant grading was particularly frustrating for the students and caused strong emotions with English such as fear, anxiety and hate. This resulted in feelings of insecurity with English.

## Part 2: University

The first three themes explored the language learnings histories and contexts in which the students developed their English. As seen in Figure 6 below, these themes were disadvantage, distance and insecurity. The remaining three themes to be discussed explore the students' initial views and feelings as they embarked on their university journeys. These themes are deficit, promise and hope.

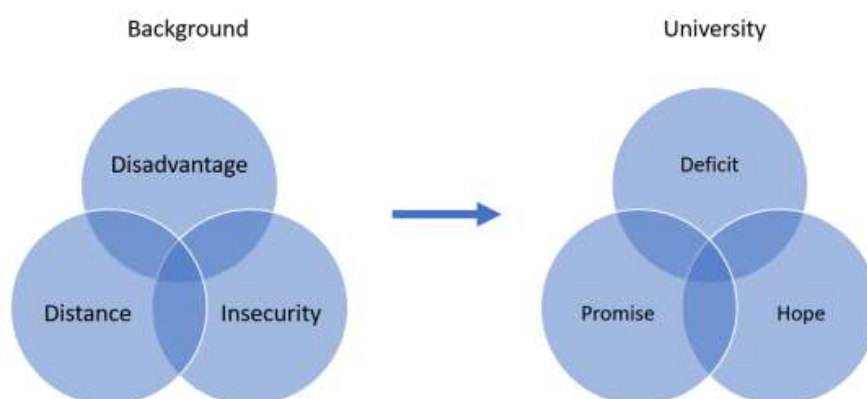


Figure 6: Main themes from Phase 1

## 4.6 Theme 4: Deficit

The last theme described the students' insecurity about English; namely negative self-appraisals and strong negative emotions towards English. These negative emotions were largely fuelled by the test-based approach to learning English, but students were more hopeful about enhancing English at university. This will be discussed in Theme 6: Hope. Regarding the negative self-appraisals that these students adopted throughout their schooling, unfortunately, these self-images were carried into to university. Theme 4 encapsulates the feelings of lack, deficiency or deficit the students experienced upon entering university. Deficit means to not have enough of something and these students felt that they did not have enough English capital. This led to a lack of confidence and embarrassment.

### 4.6.1 *Students felt that their English was not sufficient which affected their confidence to communicate*

Low confidence was brought up by at least five students (Zoe, Kyle, Reflection 1; Zoe, Jennifer, Leo, Interview 1). Zoe, below, reports feeling “*afraid*” to communicate and present in English and suggests that her low confidence comes from her lack of elaboration and grammar skills.

I'm quite afraid to communicate with others using English, because I not good at elaborate a sentence and present it in front of people. Also, I did not have a foundation of grammar, so I have less confidence in talking English.

Zoe - Reflection 1

Ryan is another student who felt a lack of confidence in the university setting. Ryan (below) reflects that he feels “*helpless*” and that his “*poor English*” may become a “*barrier*” at university. The extract from his reflection below shows that Ryan is worried about English and communicating with peers in group work. He perceives these classmates to have a higher level of English than him. This extract shows the struggle to contend with English within a new learning style which includes more group projects. Having been through the local schooling system, which the students attested to be exam-focused, the transition to a different learning environment is a concern for students like Ryan.



I always feel helpless when I am talking to foreign. I think that poor English makes me lose confidence. Especially in university, it may become a giant barrier for me to learn as every lesson uses English and all my groupmates can speak English with high efficiency. It may need to take a lot of time to adapt into this new environment which is totally different from my past 12 years.

Ryan - Reflection 1

In addition to having a lack of confidence, some of the students felt social embarrassment with their English. Leo, for example, perceived that he had “*terrible*” speaking skills and this caused him to feel anxious about being laughed at and seen as “*weak*”. With better English proficiency, Leo sees that he would be treated as “*normal*”. This shows that Leo has a deficit identity with his English which he sees as being a basic component of the ‘normal’ university student.

**Leo:** *when I using some ... Yeah, I ... Yeah, I speak English in a terrible ... Yeah, in terrible way, yeah, people will laugh or -*

**Andrew:** *Mm-hmm.*

**Leo:** *- or-or they ... they may, uh, they may ... yeah, they may treat-they may treat you ... they'll think you are so weak in English.*

**Andrew:** *Mm-hmm.*

**Leo:** *- that uh, this ... this I don't want to see that. And-and without this situation, I think that people, uh, just, they just tre-treat you as normal when you're s-speaking in English*

Leo - Interview 1

Ryan also reported being fearful of social judgement when imagining speaking with international students. Ryan, below, relayed that he “*won't talk*” to international students because he feels “*embarrassed*”. Ryan's embarrassment comes from having “*studied English for so many years*” but not perceiving that he is proficient, and this caused a fear of not

understanding others or being understood. He reflects that he has still not found the best way to enhance his English. This extract brings further evidence that these students have not learnt English for practical use and this has contributed to negative self-perceptions and deficit identities.

**Andrew:** *Of course. Um, would you like to see more international students at [this university]?*

**Ryan:** *Yes. I want to see them, but ... but, um, maybe I will ... I won't talk to them.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Ryan:** *Well ... well their ... their English is so flu ... fluent -*

**Andrew:** *Mm -hmm.*

**Ryan:** *- and some of them have accent. I can't understand what ... what ... what they're talking.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Ryan:** *Well, there's a ... I'm embarrassed when ... when we talk to them, and we don't know what ... what he is talking about.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah. Okay.*

**Ryan:** *But I think that more ... more international students is good.*

**Andrew:** *Okay. Yeah. You said about embarrassment. Do you feel embarrassed about your own English level rather than proud?*

**Ryan:** *I'm - I'm embarrassed. Well, I've ... I've studied English for so many years*

**Andrew:** *Yeah. Um, is it the way that you studied English before?*

**Ryan:** *Maybe, yeah. Still, I'm still find a way to find out maybe a correct way to learn English.*

#### 4.6.2 Theme 3 summary

The insecurities that these students developed at school were carried into university where they felt that they were not good enough. The students reported feelings of helplessness, being scared, and embarrassment with English. These lower proficiency students had not had the opportunities to develop positive self-identities with English and as they began their university careers, they were at a disadvantage, not only in terms of proficiency, but also in their closeness and confidence with English. In some cases, English was clearly inhibiting their willingness to engage and communicate in the early stages of university.

#### 4.7 Theme 5: Promise

The theme of promise represents the focal students' belief that investment in English holds practical value and will lead to rewards. The promise of the intrinsic value of English, made by society and its institutions like universities, is the trust that these students have that their efforts with English will pay off and translate into real-world returns.

##### 4.7.1 Value: Students felt that English would bring practical benefits

These students held strong beliefs in the importance of English and felt that English could be used in various practical situations in their futures. Despite negative perceptions about their own English skills reported in the last section, I gained the strong feeling that these students did not hold negative sentiments about English itself, and at the beginning of university, did not question the legitimacy of English as the medium of instruction. Leo (Interview 1) said that he preferred English to Cantonese instruction at university because it is more “*useful*”. Other students referred to English as an “*international language*” (Zoe, Interview 1) and a “*common*” language (Kyle, Interview 1). Students appeared to value English for its practical use rather than a language they liked or identified with. Most of the situations they described about using English included their studies (Kyle, Christine, Ryan, Interview 1), job interviews (Daniel, Interview 1), careers (Zoe, Kyle, Ryan, Interview 1), communicating with foreigners (Daniel, Ryan, Zoe, Interview 1), and moving to other countries (Leo, Kara, Interview 1). Only one

student spoke of English in terms of personal interest. This was Christine (Reflection 1) who said that she liked reading Harry Potter.

The pressure with English increased for these students as they approached high-stakes exams, especially at senior secondary school. Some of the students reflected a change in attitude towards English as they increasingly saw its importance for getting into university. This point is expressed by Anson, below, who suggests that his “*attitude*” towards English became more serious at secondary school.

*... the most difference between primary school and secondary school is the attitude. Because I know English is very important in secondary school to university. It's a common language that we use in university so I really want to get improved on it and know the literature...*

Anson - Interview 1

For Kyle, a change in attitude came with the realisation that English could be useful beyond the DSE exam. Like other students, the HKDSE exam forced Kyle to take English seriously, but below he goes on to reflect that a deeper realisation took hold in which he needed English to communicate. This realisation did not come earlier because Kyle did not have opportunities to use English in an informal or communicative way. This is the disadvantage these students hold compared to students who have home or school lives that attune them to viewing English as a form of cultural capital from an early age.

*"I think the first I want to change is after when I need to face DSE. But I think what really changed the mind is that English is what is needed for practical instead of following marks only. What I really need to use that language to talk with the native foreigners. Yeah, and this moment, I think English is not just for DSE only."*

Kyle - Interview 1

Overall, there was a deep feeling that English held practical value and could be used in a range of contexts. At senior secondary school many of the students placed more importance

on English as it was a key to attaining a university position. Some of the students felt that they were too late in realising the value of English. At university, the students appeared content that English was the medium of instruction and thought that English would be useful in their future careers.

#### *4.7.2 Status: Students felt that investment in English would bring increased status*

All the students felt that English was essential at university which comes as no surprise as most of their subjects are taught and assessed in English. As mentioned previously, there was no animosity that English was the medium of instruction and there was a general acceptance of this status quo. These students appeared to be looking beyond university and saw that EMI education could provide symbolic capital to compete in a globalised workplace. Future career was mentioned by most participants as a reason to develop their English and they saw the practical and symbolic value of English to increase their competitiveness. One example comes from Ryan, below, who suggests that Cantonese instruction would reduce his competitiveness after university. It is significant that his argument in favour of English medium instruction is not based on its effectiveness for learning but on the premise that without it, his prospects would be lowered. This suggests that English holds much symbolic capital for Ryan.

**Ryan:** *Well, English is an international language, no matter where I go, I can use them to communicate with the people there.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah, yes. Okay. But would it ... wouldn't it be easier if your lectures were in Cantonese?*

**Ryan:** *Hmm, I didn't think so. But with our ... my lecturer as in Cantonese, and I do all the ... all the stuff in Chinese -*

**Andrew:** *Mm -hmm.*

**Ryan:** *- but once I graduated from university, when I have a job, my competitiveness is very low -*

**Andrew:** *Mm -hmm.*

**Ryan:** - compared to a -to a student outside Hong Kong, I think that's not -not -not so good.

Ryan - Interview 1

Similarly, Kara, believes that English is attached to a person's symbolic capital saying that “people know how to speak English is really high class people” (Interview 1). Below, she relates English fluency to status and financial position. It is clear from speaking with Kara in the mentoring sessions that she feels she has low cultural and economic capital. Coming from a family with low English proficiency and low finances to fund extra-curricular activities, she longed to increase her status through English. For example, she thought that if she developed a British accent, she could increase her status. In one mentoring session she described spending hours in front of the mirror, speaking to herself and trying to develop her accent. Below, Kara relates English to money.

**Andrew:** You said at kindergarten you thought English speakers are like, high class. Do you mean Hong Kong people who are fluent in English?

**Kara:** Yes.

**Andrew:** Do you think they get higher status?

**Kara:** Maybe rich people

**Andrew:** Rich people? Okay.

**Kara:** Yes.

**Andrew:** So people who are good at English, that equates with being...

**Kara:** Money

**Andrew:** With money, yeah.

Kara - Interview 1

In summary, English held symbolic meaning for these students. Through enhancing their English, they expected to gain more symbolic capital which would make them more competitive in the jobs market. English appeared to be seen as more valuable than Cantonese in raising their symbolic capital.

#### *4.7.3 Mobility: Students felt that English would bring more opportunities*

As well as status, mobility emerged as a sub-theme of promise and refers to the freedom to access better opportunities and attain more status. The students generally believed that English would offer opportunities to enhance their life chances, for example, finding employment. Outward mobility was especially commented on which means moving out of Hong Kong.

At the time of the first interviews, Hong Kong was experiencing a social movement in response to an axed extradition law. The strong response of the government had left many of these students feeling that Hong Kong was not a suitable place to live. Some, like Anson, Leo and Marco also commented that they would not like to bring up their children in the education system in Hong Kong. Anson for example, said that *“the society is gone bad and but I think that’s more important in the education. I don’t really like, actually I don’t really like my son to have spoon feeding in Hong Kong”* (Interview 1).

The theme of outward mobility came up in the first interview with Leo who felt that English could help him to leave Hong Kong. Leo cited reasons of the competitive and stressed lifestyle in Hong Kong, the lack of affordable housing and the recent political tensions which meant that *“more people are afraid about this Hong Kong”* (Leo, Interview 1). In a later mentoring session, Leo said that his parents wanted to pool their resources and send him overseas.

The wish to leave Hong Kong was certainly shared by other students, Kara for example desired to live in Italy as a fashion buyer and Christine wanted to move to Canada. Only one student (Jennifer) wanted to stay in Hong Kong to live near family and friends. One point that was clear is that English would facilitate any move overseas. As Ryan put it, the *“basic requirement is, you can speak English fluently”* (Ryan, Interview 1). Leo, below, sees English as an 'assistant' rather than something holding him back.

**Andrew:** Yeah. So, do you feel like if you develop your English skills, then you would have a higher chance -

**Leo:** Yeah.

**Andrew:** - to ... to leave Hong Kong?

**Leo:** Yeah. that's-this may extremely help I think -

**Andrew:** Yeah-yeah.

**Leo:** - extremely help.

**Andrew:** Do you see English as like a barrier, or as something that can enable you?

**Leo:** Uh, not-not barrier. I think it's like, it's uh, it's an acceptance, assistant for me-

**Andrew:** An assistant, yeah-yeah.

**Leo:** Yeah, for me to-to-do things more convenience, yeah.

Leo - Interview 1

In general, the students believed that English would offer them upward progression in life and they especially related English to offering better job prospects. As political tensions rose in Hong Kong, and students reflected on the shortfalls of their schooling, at least half wanted to move overseas. English was seen as an essential mobiliser for any overseas move.

#### *4.7.4 Theme 5 summary*

In early life, these participants viewed English as a school subject and the dry teaching style created negative emotions towards English. During secondary school, students reported taking English more seriously as they realised that it was a 'ticket' to university and better prospects. This realisation came late because the students had not been in a home or school environment that enabled informal or real-life experiences with English. This was a disadvantage for these students in terms of English. English was also seen as a way to increase symbolic capital and status, and it could be argued that the students like English medium instruction for this reason, even at the cost of knowledge accumulation which they may gain more from if classes were taught in Cantonese. Lastly, as well as social mobility,



some students saw English as way for outward mobility and a way to leave Hong Kong during troubled times and a bleak political future.

#### 4.8 Theme 6: Hopes for new English experiences at university

This theme captures the positive feelings the focal students felt towards enhancing their English in new ways at university. As described in the earlier themes, these students were critical about how they had learnt English at school, and lacked the home life and opportunities to feel close to English. At the start of their university lives, these students held high hopes that they would gain a more authentic and social English learning experience.

##### *4.8.1 Students wanted authentic English experiences to enhance proficiency, fluency and connections*

A strong sentiment to arise was that university would offer a different approach to English enhancement. These students thought that learning would be less exam-driven and more student-led, and a prevalent hope was that they would be able to develop social English and fluency. This would help them to gain confidence with English which they were not able to secure from their schooling.

From the early mentoring sessions, it was clear that the students perceived that they would have a range of opportunities to enhance their English skills at university. They felt positive that university would afford them real-life experiences which included speaking with international students, going on exchange and internship, joining clubs and societies, and interacting with teachers in English. This is reflected by Kara below.

Now, I am a university student and I know that [the university] provide a lot of platform for student to equip their English like exchange programs, English learning centre and so on. So, I am looking forward to learn English in university.

Kara - Reflection 1

Ryan's hope at this early stage of university was to find a new way to learn English which could put him on a different trajectory with English. Ryan reflected back to his secondary

schooling and the disadvantages he faced which left him feeling that his learning had been “*in vain*”. It is clear that he has pinned his hopes on reaching a higher level with English through new learning experiences.

The exam result not very good [HKDSE], I have asked my English teacher for supporting, she told me that if I want to improve my spoken or written English, I should talk and read more. My family and my friends seldom speak in English and it is not easy for me to find suitable books to read but I have tried to remember some vocabularies, however, I did not know how to use them when I speak or write. After that, I think what I have done is in vain. Therefore, in university, I hope that I can find the right way to learn English and put me in a higher level.

Ryan - Reflection 1

Many of the students shared Ryan’s hope of developing English skills in new ways. Leo (Reflection 1), for example, hoped that “*there may be some other way for me to improve my English skills instead of only keeping doing mock papers and exercises*”. Ryan, below, hopes for a learning experience that is his “*own experience and not teacher experience*”. Here, he is referring to the teacher-led style at secondary school and sees that university learning puts more emphasis on student responsibility.

**Andrew:** Yeah. Okay ... okay, um, so what about like English at university? Do you think the way you learn at university is different to the way you learnt before?

**Ryan:** Yes -yes. Uh, as before, you also, uh ... One way is teachers teach us, but in university, I need to learn by myself and I can then go to find something that I need.

**Andrew:** Yeah.

**Ryan:** Yeah. Yeah, I think that's ... that's the main thing, yeah. And there's a lot of support at university, but, yeah, you do ... you do have more responsibility to do it by yourself, and just to, uh, use these various different resources or people to -to help you.

**Ryan:** *Mmmm.*

**Andrew:** *So, how do you feel about learning English in that way?*

**Ryan:** *Uh, I think there's - that's more interesting compared to secondary school or primary school, -*

**Andrew:** *Okay.*

**Ryan:** *- because I -I had to, I learn for myself, and not - not taught by teachers.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah - yeah.*

**Ryan:** *That's my own experience and not teacher experience.*

Ryan - Interview 1

Some students (Anson, Christine, Kara, Kyle, Zoe – Interview 1) identified that speaking would be the most useful way to enhance their English. Speaking practice was seen as effective for building confidence and cementing vocabulary. One of the main ways identified by the students in enhancing their speaking and communication skills was interacting with international students. Kyle, below, suggests that English is an avenue for 'building a global network' which further shows evidence of the belief that English provides opportunities to increase cultural capital.

*"I would love to speak more to the, um, foreign exchange students. There are a great opportunity. Erm I think English in university is a very important language for us to building our global network".*

Kyle – Interview 1

To sum up, at the start of their university lives, these students were excited at the prospect of developing their English in authentic and social ways. They yearned for a different experience

to school which they felt had hindered them. The students hoped that engaging in new approaches to enhancing their English would set them on a better trajectory with English.

#### 4.8.2 Future selves: Students desired to be confident and fluent in English

The students imagined their desired selves and what they wanted to become as they progressed through university. Confidence and fluency in English were prominent features of this imagined self. Zoe (Interview 1), for example, hoped to become *“a person to speak fluent English and be more confidence to speak in English”* and Jennifer (Interview 1) wanted to be able to *“communicate with others fluently”*. They perceived that this could especially be achieved by making friends with international students. The students also wanted to develop advanced skills in vocabulary and academic writing which would help them in their university studies. Jennifer (Interview 1), for example, wanted to *“read some passage ... and understand their meaning, and not always check dictionary”*.

In the extract below, Daniel reflects how he feels *“excited”* to learn English at university and improve his communication skills. He is already thinking about building up his linguistic capital for job recruitment so that he can *“stand out”*.

With regards my attitudes, feelings and hopes about English at university, I am pleased that it is totally different from secondary school. It is widely known that learning at university is very free and no more 'HKDSE'. My attitude is very interested and excited to learn English at university because I want to improve my English writing and communication skills in order to get a chance for exchange. I also hope that I can equip some advanced English strategies, for instance, essay writing skills. Therefore, I can stand out myself for the job recruitments and selection of internship and exchange.

Daniel - Reflection 1

Like Daniel, Jennifer was also looking forward to when she would be 'evaluated' on her English, presumably when applying for jobs. Jennifer, here, is also thinking in terms of building up linguistic capital and hopes to be able to communicate fluently.

English is one of the important criteria to evaluate a persons' education level so I sincerely hope that I can speak fluently and use English without any big difficulties.

Jennifer - Reflection 1

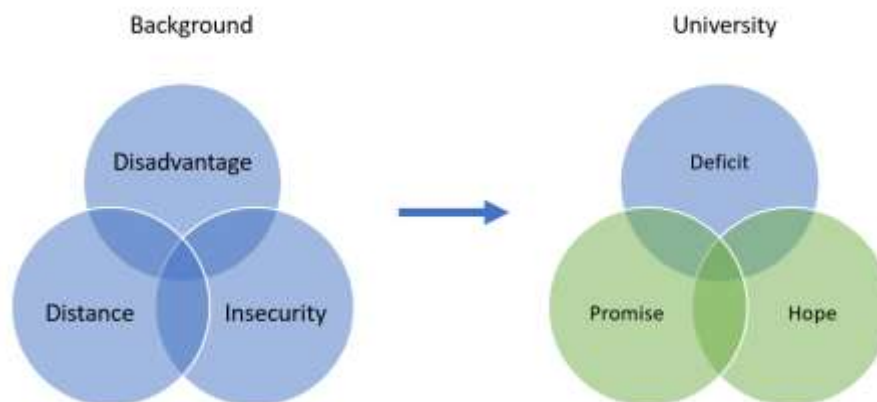
Overall, these students had clear visions of their futures selves and hoped to become confident communicators in English. As well as wanting to enhance academic skills, they were already thinking about internship, exchange and job recruitment and wanted to be able to handle themselves in English in these contexts.

#### *4.8.3 Theme 5 summary*

The students felt positive about being at university and wanted to enhance their English skills in new ways. These students especially desired to develop fluency and communication skills in casual settings and meet international students. These students had clear future visions of themselves and by graduation, wanted to be confident and effective communicators in English. They envisioned specific contexts, like job interviews, where they would need these skills.

### **4.9 Connections between themes**

Students were very critical about their past English learning experiences and lamented the focus on tests and the lack of authentic learning opportunities. These past experiences detrimentally influenced participants' confidence and feelings towards their English abilities. Students carried many of these emotions into university but at the same time, felt that they had done well to make it to one of the limited university places available. The challenges they faced in their early university experience were therefore infused with the hope of a fresh chance to learn English in a new way and a realisation that English would benefit them in their studies and future opportunities for exchange, internship, employment and potentially outward mobility from Hong Kong.



*Figure 7: Connections between the Phase 1 themes*

The themes of disadvantage, distance and insecurity represent the students' journeys with English in reaching university. Students felt disadvantaged in their early home life as well as the lack of opportunities at a young age. Better opportunities might have cushioned the start of formal English learning at primary school but instead the students felt the weight of English and did not proceed to a good start. The way English was taught at school was heavily criticised by these students for being harsh, test-based and lacking any authentic or social elements. This teaching of English as an academic subject over the years created distance with the language and the more they struggled, the more they felt alienated from English. Preparing for the senior secondary school exams appeared to be the most stressful time when students were spoon-fed test strategies and formulaic language which further increased the distance they felt from English. The disadvantage and distance these students experienced welled into emotion and a lack of confidence. Students even reported a fear of English. Insecurity with English was evident in all of the focal students who held low self-perceptions of their language abilities and positioned themselves as low-achievers.

Upon reaching university, the students were largely hopeful, positive, and felt lucky to have made it in; yet past insecurities haunted them. The theme 'deficit' represents the accumulation of all those past experiences into what could be termed deficit identities. Despite reaching university, these students did not feel that their English proficiency was worthy and began their studies with a lack of confidence.

The promise of English was, however, strong and the students saw university as an opportunity to set themselves on a better trajectory. The themes of promise and hope are shown in green in Figure 7 to represent a positive future state. All students were well on board as to the value, status and opportunities English would bring and were keen to enhance their linguistic capital. They held specific visions of desired selves and saw university as the training

ground to achieve these futures states. The students were also pleased to escape the constraints of their background and schooling and hoped to enhance their English in a more holistic manner. Though continuing to battle with their deficit identities, the promise of English and the hope for new learning experiences lifted their spirits and set a clear track for the pursuit of English.

## 4.10 Review of Phase 1 Themes

This table recaps the key themes and subthemes from the Phase 1 data collection.

Table 10: Phase 1: Summary of key themes

<b>Theme 1: Disadvantage</b>	<i>Illustrative quotes</i>
1.1 Disadvantage from lack of family's ability to support English development	<i>because they do not have a good academic background before. So, they don't know English very well</i>
1.2 Disadvantage because they did not attend an English kindergarten	<i>Some of them have some English lesson in kindergarten they always see their fluent teacher. So, they taught English in small age, but I don't think we have this chance</i>
1.3 Disadvantage from financial constraints	<i>when I was even secondary school I think if I have money and I want to go to exchange</i>
<b>Theme 2: Distance</b>	<i>Illustrative quotes</i>
2.1 Distance created from the learning style at primary school	<i>In primary school, I always do the paper. Always do a paper and some grammar, I don't really understand how to use but we just follow the example and copy, copy, and copy. So, I hate doing it</i>
2.2 Junior secondary school held less pressure	<i>junior secondary school life is better. I can use some of the English uh, for communication</i>
2.3 Negative sentiment and distance from English felt at senior secondary school	<i>I think English is really, like destroyed my life I think, because I have a lot of test and then I need to meet the requirement, so it's really hard. I just want to learn, like, normal talking, but not for the examination.</i>
<b>Theme 3: Insecurity</b>	<i>Illustrative quote</i>
3.1 Students felt insecure in their English identities	<i>I always failed my English subject in the secondary school which make me felt depressed and scared to learn English</i>
<b>Theme 4: Deficit</b>	<i>Illustrative quote</i>
4.1 Insecurity led to deficit identities with English when starting university	<i>I speak English in a terrible - Yeah, in terrible way, yeah, people will laugh</i>
<b>Theme 5: Promise</b>	<i>Illustrative quotes</i>
5.1 Students thought English would bring practical value	<i>It's a common language that we use in university so I really want to get improved on it</i>



5.2 Students thought English would bring increased status	<i>people know how to speak English is really high class people</i>
5.3 Students thought English would bring opportunity and mobility	<i>basic requirement is, you can speak English fluently</i>
<b>Theme 6: Hope</b>	<i>Illustrative quotes</i>
6.1 Students hoped for authentic English learning experiences	<i>there may be some other way for me to improve my English skills instead of only keeping doing mock papers and exercises</i>
6.2 Students desired to be confident and fluent users of English	<i>I sincerely hope that I can speak fluently and use English without any big difficulties</i>

## CHAPTER 5 *Results: Phase 2*

### 5.1 Introduction

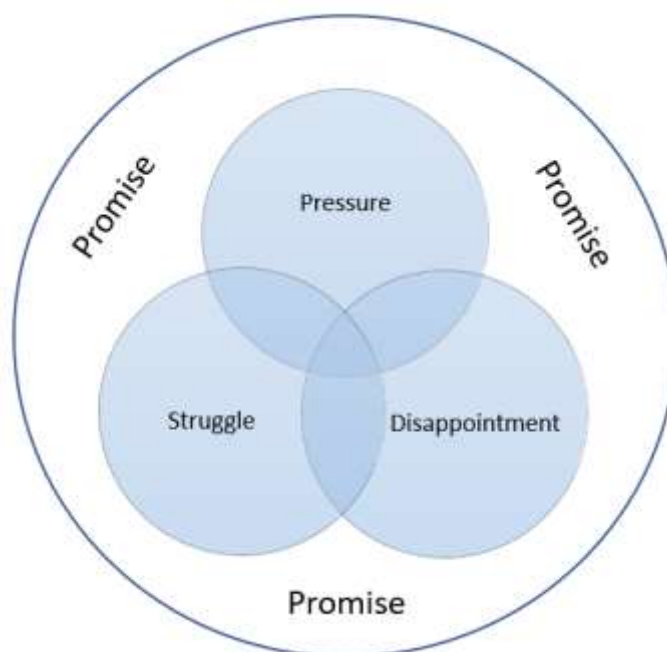
The Phase 2 data collection was conducted from October 2019 to early February 2020. Field notes were collected throughout semester 1, and the reflections and interviews were conducted during late January and early February 2020. During semester 1, the political situation in Hong Kong grew tense and resulted in the closure of the campus in Week 11 (November, 2019). At the time of the interviews, the university was coming out of an extended semester break and parts of the campus were beginning to reopen. However, Covid-19 was gaining severity and the university announced that the second semester would initially be taught online. After conducting the first two interviews in person, the announcement of the cancellation of all face-to-face activities meant that the remaining eight interviews were conducted online. At this stage, I knew the students well, and they “appeared comfortable with the online environment” (Field notes 2). The interviews and reflections focused on the semester 1 experience and the students’ current attitudes towards English. As with the Phase 1 data collection, I conducted thematic analysis on the data. This resulted in three interrelated themes (Pressure, Struggle, Disappointment) and one overarching theme (Promise).

### 5.2 Themes overview

At the beginning of the interviews, most students reported some positive general reflections about the first-term experience. Leo, for example, said that it was “better than secondary school learning”, Daniel found the experience “very interesting” as he could make friends, and Christine reflected that despite “difficulty in using English ... university life was great so far”. The data, however, revealed some major tensions and struggles for the students. Overall, the Phase 2 results show a tension between the students’ experiences of English during semester 1 (the lived reality), and their ongoing belief in the importance of English (the desired reality). Three interrelated themes focus on the pressure, struggle and disappointment students experienced. Pressure (Theme 1) came from comparing themselves to more peers, whom they perceived as more proficient, and the feeling that they had to catch up in their English skills if they hoped to succeed in their studies and future. Struggle (Theme 2) came from the tasks they needed to do in English, such as academic listening, writing, and reading. These students also struggled with the learning style which was different from their schooling experiences and left them feeling lost. Struggle to overcome deficit English identities and build confidence was also evident. Disappointment (Theme 3) came from the dashed hopes of using

English as a social language and meeting international students. Despite these difficulties, a fourth theme showed a positive and unfaltering belief in English, and the students continued to pursue English as a practical investment for increasing their status and mobility. This promise of English (Theme 4) was a guiding light to the students as they contended with English on a daily basis in this EMI setting.

In the following section, I report and interpret each of these themes, this is followed by a section showing connections between the themes. Finally, a table is presented which encapsulates the themes with illustrative quotes.



*Figure 8: Main themes from Phase 2*

### 5.3 Theme 1: Pressure

This theme captures the sense of pressure the students felt from English as semester 1 progressed. Much of this pressure came from the perception that their English level was not as high as their peers, causing disadvantages in their studies and potentially impacting their job prospects. The sense of pressure experienced by these students can be described as a feeling of being behind in their English development. It is the feeling of not being good enough and the need to do more. This feeling of pressure experienced by these students caused a range of responses including the need to work harder, feelings of embarrassment with their English, and wanting to be like their peers.

#### 5.3.1 Students felt pressure when they compared themselves to peers

All of the focal students perceived that they had a low English level. These perceptions can be defined as the students' understanding and interpretation of their English, based on their experiences and reflections. Zoe, for example, admitted that *"the first pressure for me is to learn the basic of the English"*. One main theme was that their peers had a study advantage due to their higher English proficiency and because *"they're already familiar to use English through write and speak"* (Christine, Interview 2). For Marco (Interview 2), this caused *"embarrassment ... because, maybe these other classmates may understand but I don't understand the work"*. At least four students made references to the time saved by these higher-level peers in completing assignments, which is significant as the comments were initiated by these students. One student reported that *"they just change many time after the first draft or second draft. Yeah just she write many draft before the real assignment"* (Anson, Interview 2). Anson reflected that while it takes him much time to produce a first draft, other students can spend more time redrafting their assignments to edit them to a higher level. Similarly, Daniel perceived himself to be at a 'disadvantage' because of the time it takes him to use translation tools to complete assignments. Below he compares himself to other students who are *"fluent and have a good English level"*.

*There are some disadvantages because the first of all is when I... I can... I usually spend a lot of time to write essay because my English writing and reading is not good. For me to find the essays, to find the journals or other sources to write essay, I usually need to use Google translate to translate the essay, the sources and then to write in the essay. Therefore, it cost time more than other students, which they're fluent and have a good English level.*

The Phase 1 results showed that family background and socio-economic status influenced these students' English development. This sense of disadvantage continued into university. For example, below, Kara feels pressure when comparing herself to students who attended international schools, especially the perception that they have opportunities to speak English at home. Kara is from the School of Design which appears to have higher proficient students than the other focal students' departments. She reflects on the ease of which these students can present 'fluently' with 'good accents' and that she wants to "*be like them*".

**Kara:** *My pressures come from my classmates because, uh, just, uh, some classmates, they may come from international school and then when they are in secondary school, and then their English is really, really good actually like a native people.*

**Andrew:** *Mm-hmm.*

**Kara:** *And then, um, I just listened to their presentations about a design and then they can just, uh, present without any notes and then their speaking is really fluent and accent is really good.*

**Andrew:** *Yes.*

**Kara:** *So ... so I kind of like there is, there are, uh, just want to be like them, so I feel a little bit pressured because maybe their parents also speaking English at home.*

Kara – Interview 2

To sum up, these students compared themselves to peers early on in their university careers. The students had low confidence levels going into to university and as they compared themselves with their classmates, they gave themselves low-self appraisals regarding their English. This caused a sense of pressure as they felt they needed to catch up in their English proficiency to avoid getting behind in their studies. These students felt that they were having a more difficult time as they needed to exert more time and energy into their assignments. The

students positioned themselves at a disadvantage due to their perceived lower English level. Relating back to the Phase 1 results, family and schooling background most likely influenced the comparisons they made between themselves and other students at university, leading to negative self-appraisals.

### *5.3.2 Students felt pressure from the feeling that their English proficiency was not enough to succeed in their studies*

As well as a feeling of pressure from peers, students reported feeling pressure from doing their university studies in English. One of the main sources of pressure was the need to further develop English skills to keep up with their major discipline studies. Marco (Interview 2), for example, stressed that *“all the thing is English. If I don’t build my English, I can’t study well in here”*. Marco related English to success in his studies and reflected that he needs to *“build”* his English to do well at university. Below, Leo also reflects on the need to develop his English skills. For Leo, the pressure comes when receiving new assignments which he needs to complete in English.

**Leo:** *Yeah, it is quite ... is quite- is still quite a challenge to having a good develop, a good English skills.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah, yeah.*

**Leo:** *Yeah, so also in some assessment or something or some essay come to me, there's a pressure.*

Leo – Interview 2

For Jennifer, slow progress with English caused pressure as she could not reach the targets she had set herself, especially in achieving high grades. Jennifer therefore felt pressure to improve her English skills to succeed at university. Below she cites the lack of practice in English to a lack of progress.

*I think actually not really have many practice, so have very slow progress. So I-I think I better to reach my target.*

Jennifer - Interview 2

For Ryan, the pressure from his studies was that he did not know how well he was doing in English. This was due to the lack of feedback in his university English classes which was different from secondary school where he received more grades. The lack of feedback caused Ryan to feel “lost” because he did not know whether his efforts were paying off.

**Ryan:** ... *the pressure is no one to tell you what's right, what's wrong -*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Ryan:** - *you've to try and somehow, I get lost.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah, yeah. And at secondary school, did ... 'Cause the teachers-*

**Ryan:** *Just guide you -*

**Andrew:** - *guide you, yeah.*

**Ryan:** - *on what to do and tells you what level you are. And if you're, and give you a grade or something.*

Ryan – Interview 2

Overall, these students felt pressure to enhance their English so that they could succeed in their major studies. The sense was that if they did not work on their English, they would not do well. Students like Jennifer felt that progress was slow and this gave more pressure to put effort into English, though opportunities were scarce. The lack of explicit guidance and feedback also heightened the pressure for students like Ryan who felt lost in his studies.

### *5.3.3 Students felt pressure from perceiving that their English would be judged in the future*

Some of the students were already thinking towards the end of their university life and how English would impact them which also caused a sense of pressure. For example, as reported above, students generally felt that their English skills were lower than the university average. Kara, below, saw that having a lower language level would impact all the way to her future

career prospects. In the extract below, she reports discussing this with Kyle. She suggests that students who are already "*equipped with better English*" will go on to have a "*higher value*" in the company and will be in a better position to take opportunities, such as doing business overseas. The phrase 'higher value' shows that Kara is thinking in terms of human capital and the instrumental use of language skills. The importance of English and the opportunities it holds caused a sense of pressure because Kara feels that she is already behind.

**Kara:** *Me and Kyle have been discuss, um a lot like our futures, like how to find out career and then we both know that English is so important because, we um, we just talk about like if you are a person with really, really good Eng-- Really good English therefore, and now you can speak fluently and present really well, in the future if you, uh, enter in a, like a fashion company and then now your-your boss maybe, uh, will send you to like other country and then present the company's orders or other thing and then you will have like, um, higher value, I think.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah, okay.*

**Kara:** *So if right now the students have already, um, equipped with better English and then, um, he or she not need to learn English like us or-or do something and then, um, I think they were more easier during the ... these four years or like find jobs.*

Kara - Interview 2

For Jennifer, the sense of pressure comes from the 'embarrassment' of graduating from university with "*poor*" English. Jennifer is fearful of the social judgment of her English. In Hong Kong, many graduate job interviews are conducted in English and more generally, English is a symbol of education, success and prospects. Like the others, Jennifer viewed university as a time to enhance English before graduation and most of the participants had the goal of being fluent by the end of university. The looming sense of pressure comes from the perceived need to enhance English to meet the social expectations of the quality of graduates.

**Andrew:** *Yeah. Okay. Um, is there any difference in your ... in your attitude, like, do you feel English is less important or more important than what you thought before?*



**Jennifer:** *Hmm. Uh, it's still the same. It's-it's important.*

**Andrew:** *Hmm.*

**Jennifer:** *If I tell others I have study in university, but my English is too poor, that really so embarrassed.*

Jennifer - Interview 2

The extracts above have shown that many of the focal students felt pressure from the importance of English and of the thought of competing with peers upon graduation. There were also feelings of anxiety about social judgement with their English skills.

#### 5.3.4 Theme 1 summary

During the Phase 1 results, it was reported that many of these students had low self-perceptions about their English proficiency. The phase 2 results show that as students compared themselves with others during semester 1, their deficit English identities were compounded. The hopeful tone of the Phase 1 interviews and wanting to “*stand out*” (Daniel, Interview 1) had yet to be realised as these students positioned themselves as less proficient and able as peers. At this early stage in their university careers, the students were plotting their trajectories and starting to feel that they would be unable to compete with peers upon graduation. These comparisons and realisations caused pressure and the feeling that they needed to work harder to catch up with peers.

#### 5.4 Theme 2: Struggle

This theme captures the specific struggles the focal students encountered during their first semester at university. The concept of struggle is seen here as the difficult tasks or experiences students encountered and did not have the skills or confidence to immediately deal with. While pressure (Theme 1) referred to what one ought to be doing or what one should be like, struggle refers to their perceived difficulty in succeeding with specific tasks. Three main struggles emerged from the data. Firstly, students experienced great difficulty with specific skills in English, such as listening, writing and reading. Secondly, these students had

to adapt to a new way of learning which meant changing their learning approach. Finally, there was an internal struggle of overcoming insecurities about their English.

#### *5.4.1 Students struggled with English in their studies*

These students reported a range of challenges with English during their first semester as they adjusted to the new learning environment. The most widespread challenge was academic vocabulary which affected the lecture experience as well as reading and writing. Anson (Interview 2), for example, noted that "*writing our own ideas. Not just copy the reference*" was challenging. This relates to summarising and paraphrasing and is a detachment from a focus on memorisation which many of the students claimed was a large part of secondary schooling.

A few students (Zoe / Marco / Ryan – Interview 2) reported that lectures were difficult to understand. For example, Zoe below said she had "*no idea*" what lecturers were talking about and even when she checked the lecture notes, she needed to use translation tools. Marco and Ryan (Interview 2) cited accent as a problem from their lecturers who were not from Hong Kong. One student (Christine, Interview 2) said that she could understand some of the lectures but needed to use translation tools. Later she admitted that because she could not spell the words she heard from the lecturer, it took time to find out the meaning of the vocabulary and then she would lose the thread of the lecture. Zoe, below, reported how she relied on the lecture notes during lectures but encountered new vocabulary and needed to use translation tools.

**Andrew:** *But you ... do you know what the teachers are talking about now or are you still not sure?*

**Zoe:** *Um, I need to catch up with the main ... with the main idea, uh, with the lecture notes. Without a lecture note I have no idea what-what they're talking about.*

**Andrew:** *Okay. So, you need ... you need the lecture notes to support the message that the teacher's giving?*

**Zoe:** *Yes. Although I have the lecture note, some of the vocabulary I didn't know and I need to use the phone to translate it.*

Zoe - Interview 2

Writing academic articles was also a stated struggle for these students. Zoe said that she needed to use Grammarly to complete assignments but lamented that it does not check for academic style. She was disappointed to receive a low grade for her ELC essay. Daniel (Interview 2) found that academic style and referencing was a challenge as he did not need to write like this at secondary school. For Leo (Interview 2), the length of writing assignments (commonly 2,500 words) caused problems because he was used to writing shorter compositions. Leo remarked: *"I seldom write down a lot word, to write an essay like this. In secondary school, we just write about 400 or 600"*. Like Anson, he found paraphrasing to be particularly difficult. Marco (Interview 2) also mentioned the length and number of assignments as time-consuming which left him little time to develop English in more informal ways.

Lastly, reading caused difficulties. This was related to academic vocabulary and was intensified by the amount of academic texts the students needed to read. Students also needed to read university announcements/emails which *"just pour out every second"* (Marco -Interview 2). Christine (Interview 2) claimed that she used Google Translate rather than reading the texts in English. She acknowledged that the translations were not accurate but was willing to take this loss to save time.

Despite the language struggles outlined above, there was some consensus that some language improvements had been made. Seven students made specific references to minor improvements, especially in academic writing, but two students reported that they had not improved. Kara (Interview 2) thought that change takes more time and Kyle (Interview 2) concluded that the secondary school exam-focused approach pushed him to learn more.

This theme has highlighted specific struggles with English that students encountered during semester 1. Overall, students dealt with several problems related to English which appeared to affect their content understanding and the time they needed to spend on assignments. These students especially struggled with language range which affected lecture listening, reading, and their ability to express their ideas in written assignments. Some of the students relied on translation tools but these caused frustration. The amount of time needed to complete tasks relates to the point made in Theme 1 that students felt disadvantaged due to the extra effort they needed to invest in English.

#### *5.4.2 Students struggled with a new style of learning*

This theme received widespread comments from the students, many of whom struggled to adapt to different teaching methods. Based on many student comments, the teaching style at university is a shift from a test-based to a more inductive approach. This new approach, as

described by the focal students, needed them to find answers for themselves rather than rely on the teacher to supply them. In the Hong Kong schooling system, there is little time for engagement in learning due to the exam-focused curriculum which leads to a reliance on teacher instruction and an obsession with grading (Cho and Chan, 2020). In senior secondary English classes, for example, examinations are “seen as a key factor impacting on what goes on in the classroom” (Carless, 2007, p.602). In this pressurised environment, teachers have less time for discovery learning as the stakes are very high, not only for the students but also for the teachers and school rankings. This, according to the students, meant that teachers needed to be as efficient as possible in their teaching methods, and spoon-fed students test strategies in a push to prime them for exams which would impact their prospects.

During their first semester at university, the focal students had to adjust their learning style to accommodate for the less directed teaching approach, and this caused some apprehension. For example, Daniel (Interview 2) stated that *“In the first few weeks, I feel not comfortable because it’s a new style for me to learn”*. One of the most commonly reported reasons for the students’ apprehension was that lecturers do not provide all the answers and *“secondary school only have one answer that you answer the teacher”* (Anson, Interview 2). For Zoe (Interview 2), the lack of teacher questioning and explanation of answers caused additional *“pressure”*, as she did not know how well she was doing. This could be related to the larger class sizes at university and the lack of time for lecturers to give attention to individual students. As they lacked confidence, the focal students said that they barely asked a question in the lecturers for fear of embarrassment. At least four students (Daniel, Leo, Ryan, Zoe, Interview 2) suggested that at university, students were required to memorise less and think more. Through the mentoring sessions, it came through that critical thinking skills were not harnessed at secondary school due to the exam-based system. The shift from memorisation learning to one based around critical thinking therefore caused problems. Finally, during the mentoring sessions, most of the students commented that group projects caused frustration as they were not used to this style of learning and found it hard to contact and collaborate with other students. The focal students had not experienced much group project learning before, and perceived that students graduating from international schools had more experience with this style of learning.

In addition to struggling with English at university, the participants also struggled to adapt to a new learning style which required more student-led learning. Adapting to the new study approach initially caused some apprehension, but the students appeared positive and determined to succeed in the new learning environment.

#### 5.4.3 Students struggled to build confidence

As discussed earlier, the focal students appeared to hold deficit identities regarding their English. These students entered the university with a lower secondary school grade than many students and during semester 1, compared themselves to peers, concluding that they had to catch up. The students also struggled in their studies and felt behind and at a disadvantage. Some students already saw their trajectory to be lower than peers who were more fluent and could receive the benefits of better English after graduation. These factors reinforced low confidence levels with English in the students. Many of the students uttered statements such as *"I didn't expect it [confidence] to grow - because I am not good at English"* (Ryan, Interview 2). Though no students reported having lower confidence, most suggested that their confidence levels were the same or only incrementally higher at the end of semester 1. The lack of speaking opportunities was cited as one reason for not increasing confidence (Anson, Interview 2) as well as not being able express ideas accurately (Marco, Interview 2). One student gained some confidence from seeing that her language level was similar to that of her peers in her department (Christine, Interview 2). Two students thought that their lecturers were encouraging and accepting of their English levels which helped with confidence (Leo, Ryan - Interview 2). In terms of English learning, students appeared to want "safe spaces" to enhance their speaking skills away from their programme of study peers (Field notes 2).

In his written reflection below, Leo summarises his experiences of learning English in transition from secondary school to university. Leo has moved from what he calls a *"hardcore"* learning environment to a comfortable learning environment at university. He suggests that his *"identity"* as a *"weak student"* reduced his confidence to speak at university. Leo notes below that though having challenges and a *weak* student identity, he is beginning to develop confidence and motivation.

I studied in a very hardcore secondary school, teachers in that school treat the academic result of the student as the most important thing. The way teachers to achieve it is to force us (students) to do a lot of exercises and keep practicing exam strategy. Since that they just focus on teaching exam strategy to maximum my score in the exam (DSE), my basic skill of English doesn't develop so well. And what does it mean when you get a low score in the mock exam or something else? It means u are weak in English and teachers will prefer to put more resources and time to teach "good student". How do these experiences affect me when faced with English at university? First, most of the lecture at the university use English for teaching. Since my English skills don't develop well, sometimes it is hard to understand

what the lecturer teaches. Second, secondary school divide students into good and weak group by their result, so I have been treated as a weak student all the time, this Identity makes me don't have the confidence to speak or use English after studying in university. But these two things don't affect me for a long time when keep studying at university day by day, I found this is quite different from secondary school life. The lecturer is trying to teach comfortably and people are being nice and willing to help each other, so my motivation and confidence to use English are slowly increasing.

Leo - Reflection 2

The focal students were trying to overcome past disadvantages and deficit English identities but the change in confidence levels was generally low during semester 1. Low expectations, comparisons with peers and struggles in their studies, and the lack of speaking opportunities especially limited their potential to boost confidence.

#### *5.4.4 Theme 2 summary*

The main struggles of adapting to EMI university for these students were threefold. As well as dealing with the linguistic challenge, the focal students needed to adapt to a new learning approach, and overcome insecurities and deficit learner identities. Though the students seemed to make some headway in enhancing their English, progress was slow. The lack of explicit teacher instruction, guidance and feedback compounded the linguistic issues, as the students were left to cope by themselves. However, these students started to adapt to the learning style and seemed to value the different learning approach. In semester 1, these students were not able to overcome negative self-appraisals and confidence still appeared low.

### **5.5 Theme 3: Disappointment**

This theme captures the disappointment students felt at the lack of opportunities for social and informal experiences in English. It was identified in the Phase 1 results that these students were eager to enhance their English through authentic and social interaction. However, these hopes were left unfilled during their first semester at university. Though most of the formal aspects of their learning such as lectures and assignments were conducted in English, the

focal students were disappointed at the lack of speaking opportunities and chances to network in English. The lack of opportunities for spontaneous interaction was made worse by the closure of the campus in week 11 of the 13 week semester due to a political crisis. Engagement with international students was also missing and the promise of experiencing internationalisation at university did not live up to the students' expectations. As the semester progressed and the students felt pressure and struggled with English, the unfulfilled hopes of not being able to enhance their skills and confidence with spoken English turned to disappointment.

#### *5.5.1 Students felt disappointed with the lack of speaking opportunities*

All of the students were disappointed at the lack of speaking opportunities during semester 1. The main contexts where students spoke English were during the mentoring sessions, occasionally in the English Centre classes and when they needed to give a presentation in their content subjects. The Phase 1 field notes showed how enthusiastic students were in developing English informally, but these hopes did not turn into reality as most English experiences were in formal learning settings. The social language was predominantly Cantonese and most of the students did not speak English with classmates because *"if I speak English with my friend, they will think I'm so weird"* (Jennifer, Interview 2). Two students lived in halls and said that they occasionally spoke with international students which helped to build their confidence. However, Christine (Interview 2), like most of the others, reported that *"in my daily life I don't really talk - I don't really use English"*.

All students stated that their lecturers mostly taught in English. The formal aspects of the subjects such as lectures and assignments are conducted in English to comply with university requirements and the use of English links with contract renewal. Though the formal lectures were mostly conducted in English, interactive parts such as the Q&A and tutorials were often conducted in Cantonese or a mix of English and Cantonese. One student put a percentage of 80% English and 20% Cantonese in her interactions with lecturers (Jennifer, Interview 2). Field notes (Phase 2) report that the students did not engage in classroom discussions in English; and they may have felt silenced from these interactions due to their lack of confidence. This further limited their experience of spontaneous communication in English. Anson and Daniel reported feeling more comfortable using Cantonese to ask questions as described below.

**Andrew:** *Hmm. Okay. Good. How about the first 10 weeks of semester one? Did you get many chances to speak English?*

**Anson:** *Um, most of the time is on ... in this ELC lesson but other subject, uh, maybe AMA we, uh, just maybe use try Cantonese more.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah. Okay, yeah.*

**Anson:** *Because the teacher ... the ... the teacher you can ask him question, uh, by Cantonese or English but more of us choose to use Cantonese because we speak more easy.*

Anson - Interview 2

*In the lecture time, they will speak English but after you can... you have a question to ask them, they feel free for you to ask him in Cantonese or English, but I'm always use Cantonese to ask them because I think Cantonese ... I think I can present my ideas fluently and more complicate in Cantonese.*

Daniel - Interview 2

Although the students had similar experiences in terms of the situations where they used English, they held different views about what they thought about this. Kyle, for example, was critical about the lack of opportunities for speaking practice; for him the lack of interaction with lecturers was disappointing. Jennifer on the other hand felt comfortable that lecturers sometimes used Cantonese and called it a "*great experience*" (Jennifer - Interview 2).

The campus closure affected the students' chances to enhance spoken English. According to Ryan, the gap in learning and not being able to access the campus especially affected his speaking skills. The focal students did not have an English network or English home life to maintain their opportunities to speak English during the gap. This impacted their English development and reduced their opportunities to interact in English.



**Ryan:** *Because ... Well, you know, in the past few months, we seldom go to university, there's less chance to talk with others.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Ryan:** *So, speaking is not ... progress not good enough.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah. So, the like the events that, um, disrupted the semester, is that ... Do you think that's affected your English development?*

**Ryan:** *A little bit, mainly on the speaking -*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Ryan:** *- speaking area*

Ryan – Interview 2

Five students (Anson, Kara, Marco, Ryan, Zoe – Interview 2) referred to the cancellation of face-to-face teaching and extended semester break as lowering their motivation. During this period, students reported that they did not have any opportunities to practice English, especially speaking. Kara (Interview 2) commented that she was happy that semester 2 was starting and her motivation levels were going up again. Overall, all but one of the students reported low motivation levels with English during semester 1 due to the lack of opportunities and compounded by the effects of the political situation on the university.

During the Phase 1 data collection, the students were positive and hopeful about developing English in more informal and authentic ways. However, as seen above, the students had minimal opportunities for enhancing their spoken English which left them feeling disappointed.

#### *5.5.2 Students felt disappointed with not meeting international students*

During semester 1, the promise of internationalisation had not come to fruition for these students. None of the students had made international friends and the majority had not met

any international students. This did not meet the expectations they had at the beginning of semester 1 to interact with overseas students. Students like Christine and Marco said they would be shy to speak with international students, suggesting that confidence is a factor. A few students had met international students on limited occasions during group work activities or in their student halls. These rare experiences had been positive for some. For example, Zoe (Interview 2) felt that the experience of group work with an overseas student had helped her to "*learn the culture that they belong to*". Kyle, however, was less positive and felt that any conversations he had taken part in were surface conversations with no deep intercultural exchange. Below he talks about how international students form their own groups and that there is a "*line*" between international and local students.

*Actually I think [the university] has less of this kind of opportunity, in the normal situation we seldom have this kind chances. As for my department, seeing the proportion between the international student and the local student, obviously the local student are in the most proportion. So it means the chances for us to speak with them is low, as they are always, somehow form the group with them self, they always sit at the front, and the local always sit at the back, so actually we've got a line between us.*

Kyle - Interview 2

One of the main times to meet international students was through group work. However, much of this group work was conducted online and this probably reduced the depth of conversation. Christine below, records just a couple of times she checked in with an international student on WhatsApp. She goes on to suggest that she does not feel that the university is international nor that she is developing an international identity. She appears to relate this to the lack of opportunities to speak with exchange students.

**Andrew:** *And, um, so you said you've not-not really made any like international friends, so ...*

**Christine:** *My memory ... I remember that I made one Mainland classmate in my CAR subject last semester -*

**Andrew:** *Mm-hmm.*

**Christine:** - *and mainly I use English because I didn't really have good Mandarin [laughs].*

**Andrew:** *Yeah. Okay. Like do you feel -*

**Christine:** *Uh, but -*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Christine:** - *I only check for on WhatsApp and sometimes in tutorial with the ... uh, group project but not much, yes.*

**Andrew:** *Okay. So, the-the way you communicated was more like WhatsApp or like group chat, that kind of thing.*

**Christine:** *Yes.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah, rather than like face-to-face speaking.*

**Christine:** *Mm-hmm.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah-yeah. Okay. Do you feel like more international since being at university? 'Cause [the university] is trying to become a kind of international university.*

**Christine:** *Uh, I feel like this is not like international university. I don't think that I am international enough because, like I have made a Mainland student and my friends grew up in local and-and I check with her once or twice-*

**Andrew:** *Mm-hmm.*

**Christine:** - *uh, not much. Yeah, and I found that a lot of like exchange students that I didn't talk with them much.*

Christine - Interview 2

Other students (e.g. Jennifer, Anson, Marco - Interview 2) were disappointed to find that there were not any international students on their programmes. As these students appear to be on lower prestige courses, for example, higher diploma programmes, it is likely that the concentration of exchange students is higher on other more prestigious programmes. This would infer that students have uneven access to internationalisation. The civil engineering and building and real estate students especially reported low or no international students on their programmes.

Overall, students had very limited opportunities to interact with international students. This reality is different to the high expectations they had for making international friends as described in the Phase 1 interviews, reflections and field notes. One of the few opportunities students had to mix with international students was during group projects, but interaction was mainly online and the experience was not fulfilling. The lack of international students on some programmes was also a limiting factor.

### *5.5.3 Theme 3 summary*

The students' use of English over semester 1 did not meet their hopes set out in the Phase 1 data collection. During Phase 1, many of the students hoped that they would enhance their English in informal and authentic ways compared to secondary school, but this was not the case and they were left disappointed. The situation got worse when face-to-face classes were cancelled, resulting in even fewer opportunities with spoken English and this affected their motivation. The results above show that students used English in specific contexts, but these tended to be formal learning situations. The students lacked the opportunities, personal network and confidence to develop English in informal settings. In many contexts it was more natural for students to use L1, especially with peers, and lecturers seemed to permit L1 during question time and tutorials. The lack of international students also disappointed the students and reduced their opportunities for social exchange in English and network building.

## **5.6 Theme 4: Promise**

As defined in the Phase 1 results, promise refers to the assurance that better English will lead to more desirable outcomes or states of being. This includes, for example, higher paid employment or increased standing in society. The promise of English is promulgated by various institutions such as the government, schools, universities and employers. The importance that these institutions place on English circulates within society and sediments as

shared beliefs. During Phase 1, students reported the importance of English for their university lives, travels and careers. This view was further reinforced after the first semester as students needed to conduct formal parts of their studies in this academic lingua franca. The focal students appeared uncritical about the pursuit of English and shared the belief that better English would increase their opportunities. Like Phase 1, three areas were prominent in the students' reflections: value, status, and mobility.

#### *5.6.1 Value: Students continued to value English as useful*

Value refers to the practical use and transferability of English into various domains. Students reported in Phase 1 that during senior secondary school, they shifted their views from English being a subject, to English having wider use in their lives. In semester 1, the importance of English for these students was heightened as formal aspects of learning were conducted in English and university written communication is in English. The students also saw the value of English for accessing opportunities such as exchange trips and internships. The immediate value for these students was grades. As Leo put it: *"your English language level is affecting your-affecting my grades"* (Leo – Interview 2). This is one of the reasons why these students felt pressure to enhance their English. Students also valued English for its perceived use at work. Marco (Interview 2) insisted that he would need to write job applications in English and Kara (below) felt that her desired industry of work would demand English.

*And like fashion industry is a really international and they're in Hong Kong. So, um, people from, uh, even though you don't understand Mandarins or other thing or you don't know, don't know how to speak, but if you have, um, if you know how to speak English then you can communicate with, uh, different countries.*

Kara – Interview 2

Like the Phase 1 results, the students shared views about English being a useful language for travel and international exchange. Christine (Interview 2), for example, stated that *"English is very important because it's an international language"* and Kyle (Interview 2) thought that English is *"a way to pass your idea to people in different country and different background and culture"*.

The key point is that despite the struggles these students encountered over semester 1, and the lack of social networking in English, their views on the value of English were not downgraded. English, in fact, became an even more precious commodity for these students as they realised that through assignments and future job applications English would be a site of competition.

*5.6.2 Status: The students prioritised the status English would bring over the difficulties they were experiencing*

English holds great symbolic value in Hong Kong. As shown in Phase 1, there is a belief that English equates with being educated and financially well off. The students therefore placed importance on attending an EMI university. However, after a semester of studying in English at the university level, the majority of these students (Anson, Christine, Jennifer, Leo, Ryan, Kyle - Interview 2) admitted that Cantonese instruction would be easier. This was mainly related to the struggle of coping with English. After further exploration of this view, these students admitted that they preferred English instruction due to its symbolic value. The symbolic capital of studying in English was an overriding factor despite the challenges and even at the cost of not fully understanding their subjects. Leo, below, suggests that it is an expectation that university students study in English, meaning that no one would question the legitimacy of English; it is what “*should be*”. He suggests that English is an “*identifier*” to other people, again relating to the symbolic capital of English and the idea that English can increase a person's status and worth.

**Andrew:** *Yeah, yeah. Okay, yeah. Um, but do you- would you prefer it if this ... like this university was not like English medium?*

**Leo:** *Uh, uh, mm, it's fine because it's -*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Leo:** *Yeah, it's ... it's a university, not secondary school.*

**Andrew:** *So your expectation is that all-all the universities are ... like they teach in English.*

**Leo:** *Uh, it should be.*

**Andrew:** *Okay, right.*

**Leo:** *It should be.*

**Andrew:** *Why do you think? Like you -*

**Leo:** *Because ... because the one or the people study in university is because they want to get improvement or they want to have, uh, having a better identifiers as for-to other people.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Leo:** *So ... so you don't expect, so no one will expect, uh, uh, people graduating from university and they have bad English.*

Leo – Interview 2

The students were familiar with university rankings and the symbolic value of attending an elite university. Despite their university having a respectable ranking, the students viewed that it was a low status university in Hong Kong. Daniel, below, suggests how the students at The University of Hong Kong had better English and therefore were more desired by employers. It is clear from the statement below that Daniel sees a link between English, status and opportunity.

*The English level at Hong Kong U students is better than the English level of [this university] students and Hong Kong government likely to seek the HKU students to provide the opportunity, to provide more opportunity for them to do the jobs in the government.*

Daniel – Interview 2

Over semester 1, these students continued to view English in terms of status, and valued the symbolic status EMI instruction would bring. The dominant discourse was that English is associated with success and those who possess English will increase their prospects. Despite

their struggles with English, they held to the belief that English would bring symbolic capital and preferred the medium of instruction to remain English. The students evidently saw themselves within a competition based system, not only within their departments but also between the universities in Hong Kong. It was clear from some reports that they viewed their trajectories to be lower than peers at their own, and competing institutions.

### *5.6.3 Mobility: Students viewed English as a 'ticket' for success*

The theme of mobility revolves around the idea of access. From the many discussions with these students over semester 1, it was clear that the students believed that English would open new avenues and opportunities. For example, Zoe, below, positions English as a basic “*ticket*” and way to enter society. This gives the impression that a person cannot become a member of professional society without English proficiency.

**Zoe:** *I think English is really important and it's a basic ticket for us to stepping into the society.*

Zoe - Interview 2

Hong Kong society holds high expectations for English and Kara suggests that society relates better English to securing a good job. Kara's comment below supports the notion that English is an investment and a tool for mobility.

**Kara:** *The society is showing that, um, have a better level of English-English is ... can find a good job because, um, they may, the companies may, uh, like I don't know why but that's true.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah, okay yeah.*

**Kara:** *Maybe you can ... maybe they can communicate with foreign customer then, um, your ability may- better than others or something.*

Kara - Interview 2



English is seen by the focal students as a tool for mobility, and the idea of not developing their English is seen as a threat to their prospects. English is therefore an enabler but at the same time, something that could dispossess students of opportunities if their proficiency is not high enough. As Leo (Interview 2) says “*you have to keep making improvement, otherwise you will be ousted*”. The phrase ‘ousted’ suggests that having low English proficiency poses the threat of not fulfilling the profile of a ‘good’ worker.

English was generally seen by these students as a ticket. They did not claim to like English but did not hold negative views about English either. Zoe below reports that she feels some pressure to enhance her English. This supports the idea that learning English is not an academic pursuit but a necessity for building cultural capital and increase competitiveness.

*I can't say that I like English. But, uh, I think I have a pressure for me to keep ... keep motivating myself to learn English.*

Zoe - Interview 2

Students took a practical approach to English, seeing it as a reality and something unchangeable. The students did not pursue ideas about unfairness or language dispossession that I brought into conversations. Rather than focusing on the unfairness of a dominant lingua franca, students were more focused on the access English could offer. They did not position themselves as victims or casualties of the spread of English. In one conversation with Daniel below, the topic of how English became a world language was discussed. Daniel takes a very practical view and rather than seeing the dominance of English as unfair, he concerns himself more with the doors English can open and to distinguish himself from others.

**Andrew:** *English became the world language. Do you think it's fair or unfair?*

**Daniel:** *Because I think it's a history factors because the England is the... is become the strongest nation in the... around the world in in our previous years. And England government is to push the others, other countries to learn English therefore the English is to become popular and after this, up to nowadays English become the most common language around the world.*

**Andrew:** *Do you feel okay about that? Do you accept it, or do you feel annoyed with that as it's caused you a lot of work over the years to study English!?*

**Daniel:** *I think is unchangeable because the history is we cannot change the history. And I think... To be honest, I don't... I seldomly to consider this question about learning English fair or unfair, but I think the important, the most important way is, I think English is really useful in the workplace, for example to seeking a job. The people always focus on your English levels, and, and your Putonghua ... um ... Mandarin and your major study.*

**Andrew:** *So, English... if you're good at English it can bring like opportunities.*

**Daniel:** *Yes. To show off yourselves other from your... um from other students.*

Daniel - Interview 2

Like the Phase 1 results showed, most of these students viewed English as a tool for outward mobility. As the political tensions increased and the university was directly affected, the students' thoughts inevitably turned to what life would be like living in a different place. Marco, (Interview 2) for one, relayed that *"English will really help me to, uh, to get a better opportunity to go, yeah, to leave Hong Kong, I think"*. English therefore continued to be seen as an essential skill for mobility.

To sum up, these students continued to equate English with mobility during semester 1. The students were aware of the desires of society and employers for English, and readily pursued the discourse of 'better English, better life chances'. Not acquiring English also posed a threat and an undesired future state. The students saw the dominance of English as a reality, and though admitting that learning in Cantonese would be more fruitful, they did not seem to be weighed down by the dispossession of their Cantonese or any unfairness about English being the medium of instruction. English continued to be seen as a ticket for outward mobility from a Hong Kong in political turmoil.

#### 5.6.4 Theme 4 summary

Despite pressure, struggle and the lack of social experiences, the focal students continued to place great importance on English. Grading, academic studies, university communication and

the prospect of internships and exchange trips cemented the practical worth of English. The students also valued the status of English and felt that EMI was an expectation held by society and employers. Despite their struggles with English, and the lack of contact with international students, they wanted English to remain the language of instruction. Finally, the focal students continued to be persuaded by the idea that English would bring access to new and better opportunities. They viewed English in practical terms and did not appear to be persuaded or interested in alternative arguments about the unfair dominance of English. Overall, the dominant discourse was that English equated with better prospects and commitment to English was essential for their upward trajectories.

## 5.7 Connections between the themes

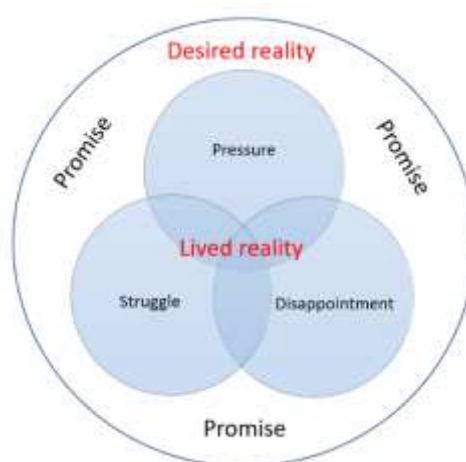


Figure 9: Connections between the Phase 2 themes

The themes described in Phase 2 reflect two realities: the lived reality and the future desired reality. The themes of pressure, struggle and disappointment represent the reality students experienced during this first semester. The theme of promise represents a future desired reality; one that English can help to facilitate. The promise of English provided incentive for the students to endure the daily struggle, with its pressures and disappointments.

Pressure and struggle came early for these students as they felt the need to exert more effort on English and found their subjects challenging. Disappointment seeped in later when they realised that they did not have the opportunities to overcome their lack of confidence with English. English was a burden for these students, but one they were willing to endure. This endurance was perhaps facilitated by the clear future self-images these students held which buoyed them up in their pursuit of English. English gave them pressure, but also promise. Pressure and promise fuelled their efforts with English and despite the struggles and

disappointments, the promise of English remained unbroken. So strong was the promise that they valued the status of EMI education over difficulties they encountered in understanding their subjects.

The Phase 2 results described the journeys the focal students took in their first semester at an EMI university. This journey had many bumps in the road but the destination was clear and the students readily continued their pursuit of English.

## 5.8 Review of Phase 2 Themes

This table recaps the key themes from the Phase 2 data collection.

Table 11: Phase 2: Summary of key themes

<b>Theme 1: Pressure</b>	<i>Illustrative quotes</i>
1.1 Pressure came from comparisons with peers	<i>when compared to the normal level of this university, yeah, it's not good</i>
1.2 Students felt pressure to enhance their English for academic success	<i>I think is higher because, uh, all the thing is English if I don't build my English, uh, I can't study well in here</i>
1.3 Pressure came from future judgement of English ability	<i>If I tell others I have study in university, but my English is too poor, that really so embarrassed</i>
<b>Theme 2: Struggle</b>	<i>Illustrative quotes</i>
2.1 Struggle to use English in academic studies	<i>Without a lecture note I have no idea what ... what they're talking about</i>
2.2 Struggle with inductive learning	<i>in my secondary school I always to memorise, just memorise the thing and then go to exam. But in university, still teachers to focus more on the thinking and they request us to um think more and find the answer myself</i>
2.3 Students struggled to enhance confidence	<i>secondary school divide students into good and weak group by their result, so I have been treated as a weak student all the time, this Identity makes me don't have the confidence to speak or use English after studying in university</i>
<b>Theme 3: Disappointment</b>	<i>Illustrative quotes</i>
3.1 Students were disappointed with the lack of spoken English opportunities	<i>in my daily life I don't really talk ... I don't really use English</i>
3.2 Disappointment from the lack of	<i>I feel like this is not like international university</i>

networking with international students	
<b>Theme 4: Promise</b>	<i>Illustrative quotes</i>
4.1 Students valued the usefulness of English	<i>if you know how to speak English then you can communicate with, uh, different countries</i>
4.2 Students prioritised the status English would bring	<i>they want to get improvement or they want to have, uh, having a better identifiers as for ... to other people... So ... so you don't expect ... so no one will expect, uh, uh, people graduating from university and they have bad English</i>
4.3 Students thought that English would be a 'ticket' to success	<i>I think English is really important and it's a basic ticket for us to stepping into the society.</i>

## CHAPTER 6 *Results: Phase 3*

### 6.1 Introduction

The Phase 3 data collection was conducted from February 2020 to June 2020. Field notes were taken during the second semester (February – May 2020) and the written reflections and interviews were conducted after the semester (May and June 2020). Written reflections were collected using Microsoft Forms with all ten students responding. Eight interviews were conducted online and two were conducted on campus. The students appeared comfortable with conducting the interviews online and most said that the online mode was more convenient for them. The focus of the Phase 3 reflections and interviews was on their experiences during semester 2 and their attitudes towards English at the end of their first year of university study.

By February, Covid-19 was gaining severity, and with a few confirmed cases in Hong Kong, the university decided to hold the first five weeks of the semester online. This was later extended to the whole semester. As well as classes being held online, all mentoring sessions were held online and this did not seem to affect the quality of the sessions. The attendance for the online mentoring sessions was high, with six students attending all sessions, and the rest only missing one or two sessions. The high attendance rate was likely due to the convenience of the online mode as students were logging on from home, and the lack of alternative opportunities to practice spoken English.

### 6.2 Themes overview

When reflecting on the year 1 experience, the participants held different but overall, quite positive views. Zoe (Reflection 3) found the experience “really fun and challenging”, Leo (Reflection 3) reflected that it was “not bad” and Kara (Reflection 3) said it was “good”. Christine (Reflection 3), however, expected to use more English after class, Anson (Reflection 3) “felt less motivated because of Coronavirus and social movement”. The Phase 3 results, overall, paint a complex picture of the student experience over semester 2 and five major themes emerged. Theme 1 expresses the frustration students felt as they continued to struggle with English and were left with fewer avenues for support due to the online mode. Some of this frustration was vented as criticism at the university and Theme 2 encapsulates the growing sense of criticism the students felt towards their EMI experience. A key aspect of this criticism was that the university was not upholding its end of the bargain to provide quality teaching in English and access to international students. Experiencing frustration and negative sentiment, the students recalibrated their trajectories with English, and Theme 3 reports on the compromises students made. At the same time, the students were beginning

to understand the complexities of EMI from different stakeholders and this resulted in them becoming more accepting of their university experience. For example, they understood that their lecturers were also struggling with English and that the university needed EMI policies to compete. The themes of criticism and compromise hold some contradiction and this shows a complex and multi-perspective student experience. As students began to reach compromises and see that they were not the only ones to blame for shortcomings in the EMI experience, they felt more comfortable with their English. Theme 4 (Connection) represents this growing sense of ease with English as students were better able to reduce the distance they felt from English. Though they reported minimal advances in proficiency, they described feeling closer to English. Finally, Theme 5 (Promise) records the students' continued investment in English, despite the difficulties and tensions they encountered. The promise of English was the wind in the sail that propelled the students to continue their pursuit of English. This promise remained unchallenged for these students and they continued to hold the belief that English would greatly benefit them.

This chapter will describe and interpret the four connecting themes (Frustration, Criticism, Compromise, Connection) and the overarching theme of promise. This is followed by a section on the connection between the themes. Finally, a table summarising the themes with illustrative quotes will be presented.

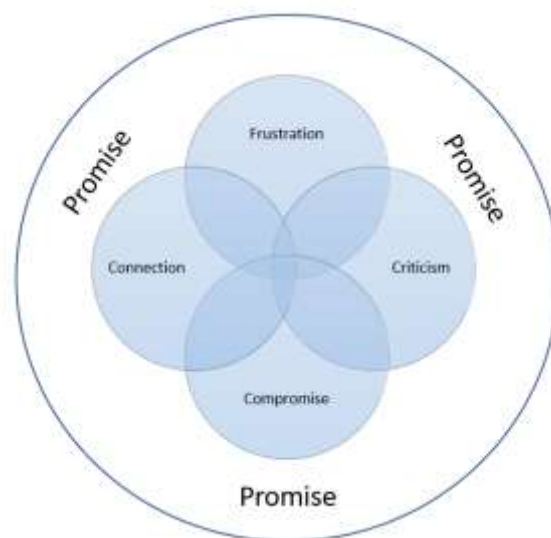


Figure 10: Main themes from Phase 3



### 6.3 Theme 1: Frustration

In Phase 2, it was reported that the focal students struggled with English, the shift in learning style, and their confidence with English. In Phase 3, many of these struggles continued to be unresolved and this caused a greater sense of frustration. Frustration refers to the feeling of annoyance or helplessness at not being able to change or achieve something. On top of their English struggles was the shift to online learning in semester 2 which affected the students' connection to the university campus, support network and overall morale. Students also reported frustration in their confidence and identity projects. Three struggles (English for academic studies, online learning, enhancing confidence) will be discussed below in relation to the growing sense of frustration the students experienced.

#### 6.3.1 Students felt frustrated from the difficulty of using English in their academic studies

The students felt frustrated because they continued to experience difficulties using English in their academic studies. Understanding and using academic vocabulary was the most widespread frustration reported by these students. Eight of the students referred to vocabulary problems when asked what challenges they had faced in their second semester (Anson, reflection 3, Christine, Jennifer, Kyle, Leo, Marco, Ryan, Zoe – Interview 3). Vocabulary affected all the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, but especially affected these students' ability to express themselves in their essay writing. For many, vocabulary range was the problem and they had trouble expressing their thoughts. Leo (Interview 3) for example, felt frustrated that he could only express himself in “*simple ways*” in English. Anson (Reflection 3) reported that he could not transfer what he had read into his own words in his essays. Ryan (Interview 3) explained that using synonyms “*drive me crazy*” as he could not gauge the specific meaning and differences between these words. Using specific academic vocabulary was also challenging for Jennifer who said she was “*not familiar to use it in my essay*”. Though students used translation tools, some words and concepts did not translate easily into English. Christine, for example, needed to study Chinese history in English. This caused problems because traditional Chinese needed to be translated into modern Chinese and then into English. Though the teacher tried to help students by adding translations to her slides, Christine continued to struggle with this subject and referred to it as a frustration often in the mentoring sessions.

*The words are very different and the teacher like they try to put Chinese words in the PowerPoint to explain to us and sometimes like there is some, I don't know how to explain. Like Chinese is different. The Chinese now is different and is very difficult to translating to English. You have to*

*understand in English. It's very difficult for me.*

Christine – Interview 3

Kyle's main issue was with tone as academic writing was still a new genre for him and he could not judge the formality of the vocabulary he needed to use (Reflection 3). In his third interview, Kyle expressed his frustration by saying that he *"get just confused on how to make it look like academically"*. This was backed up by Leo (Interview 3) who said that he could not understand the *"etiquette"* of academic writing. This finding reflects that EAP is not only teaching the linguistic side of academic English but also guiding students to enter a new community. This academic community has its own conventions and ways of communicating.

For Christine, using the ideas from source texts and integrating them into her essays caused frustration. In her own words: *"I am confused and feeling hard of just using the provided material in writing our own essay"* (Christine, Interview 3). From the mentoring sessions, it was clear that this was a common problem.

In another frustration, some students continued to struggle with the number and length of texts they needed to write. This was the *"biggest challenge"* for Zoe.

*Um, the biggest challenge is write a lot of essay 'cause, um, the essay is not talking about just writing, um, a few hundred words. Um, I remember the ... uh, the last essay that I need to write is about working, um, on two assignment. Each assignment, I need to write 2,000 word... It's really challenging.*

Zoe – Interview 3

In Phase 2 it was reported that the focal students struggled with specific areas of English. The Phase 3 data revealed that many of these challenges continued to afflict the participants and this caused a greater sense of frustration. These students may have reached some fatigue with the challenges they continued to encounter and could not solve within the first year. Vocabulary was the most reported frustration and especially affected students' writing and ability to express themselves. This lack of self-expression, coupled with the new genre of academic writing with its conventions and ways of

communicating, was a major source of frustration.

### 6.3.2 Frustration with online interaction and learning

This section will first report on the students' perceptions of inductive learning (relating back to Phase 2) and then focus on the frustration of online learning.

In Phase 2 it was reported that these students struggled to adapt to an inductive and less teacher dependent learning style. Though still a challenge, and internationally schooled students were felt to have pedagogical advantages (Field notes 2), this struggle did not manifest into frustration. The students continued to value this freer learning style. Zoe and Jennifer's comments below capture this point.

*I think this learning style is good. Because, um, student need to, uh, find a solution for ... by themselves to solve the problem. It's good for them to do the academic research in the future.*

Zoe – Interview 3

*I enjoy it a lot. I am find a better way to improve myself rather than follow others.*

Jennifer – Interview 3

Daniel referred to secondary school learning as 'chicken feeding' (Interview 3). Below, he offers evidence to suggest that his critical thinking skills have developed at university. Overall, Daniel showed great enthusiasm for the style of learning at university.

*I will try to question myself, and then more to ... uh, question myself at the knowledge behind. For example, when I study some engineering subjects, I will ask myself, is there a logic behind, or can explain this knowledge? And simply or completely to ... in order to test myself, uh, to understand, uh, knowledge completely or not?*

Daniel – Interview 3

Leo and Ryan valued the opportunity to learn while on task (i.e. researching and completing assignments) and felt this to be more authentic than the test-based approach they had experienced at school.

*Practice is very, uh, is a good way to make improvement, yeah.*

Leo – Interview 3

*Instead of just learning from the books or what. I think practice is more important.*

Ryan – Interview 3

Kyle also valued the learning style but felt that success was dependent on students' self-discipline!

*I think it's also half-half (chuckles) I think. It's definitely having an advantage to be more free but, um, um but that also depends of, uh, discipline. If we, uh, if we're getting lazy, then it definitely affect our learning. Yeah.*

Kyle – Interview 3

Though the shift to a more inductive style of learning at university turned out not to be a source of frustration, another problem related to learning afflicted the students. Online learning was adopted in the final three weeks of semester 1 during the campus closure, and throughout semester 2 as Covid-19 hit. Though online learning brought some positives to the students such as convenience and flexibility, overall, students appeared frustrated by this new mode of learning, especially the lack of interaction and rapport with lecturers and peers.

Kyle reported above that inductive learning required discipline, online learning added to the need for self-discipline as students logged onto classes from home. Zoe, below, describes how “*working from home doesn’t have a limit*” and appeared to frustrate and bother her.

*I think the most thing that affects me is I can’t, um, having a face-to-face lesson. And finally I got less ... face-to-face lesson, um, is required me to have more time management. Um, because work ... working at home it doesn’t have a limit about, um, when you need to work and when you need to sleep. Because, um, the daily routine is I wake up and I open the computer, and I ... and then I start to work. If I tired and I get some sleep. After that, um, if I wake up again and I open the computer again and work. Yes.*

Zoe – Interview 3

The lack of connection that came with online learning seemed to discourage the students. As Daniel says below, he could not ‘build the relationship’ with others.

*I think it’s more difficult and compared to online teaching, face-to-face teaching could allow us to build a relationship between the lecturers and the students. And then I think is important.*

Daniel – Interview 3

Though Hong Kong did not implement a full lockdown these students were frustrated that they barely went outside during the first few months of the pandemic. The campus was open but was mainly deserted during this time. Studying from home heavily reduced their chances to meet friends. Anson (Interview 3) found that “*the most difficult is need to stay at home a long time*” and this “*affect the study*”. One way in which Anson found his studies to be affected is that during face-to-face classes he could informally ask his peers for help and clarification. This was missing in the online mode where he could only ask questions directly to the teacher who “*don’t know what I was saying*” (Anson, Interview 3). This lack of clear communication was frustrating for Anson. Other students reported missing in-person contact with peers. Zoe, for example, stated that:

*I think why I prefer face-to-face lesson is I can check with my classmate. And if I have any question about the lecture and I can ask my classmate.*

Zoe – Interview 3

Similar assertions were heard from Christine (Interview 3) who found face-to-face classes more “*valid*” because she could “*discuss what the lecture is about and chat after lessons*”. Marco (Interview 3) appeared to be frustrated because students could not “*talk to each other very directly*”. Marco used break-out rooms in his English classes but found that “*group discussion is not going very well*”. These rare online discussions not only reduced his motivation and opportunities to speak English but also the chance to build rapport with peers. It was clear that all of the focal students missed the face-to-face social side of university. As they had not built a social network in English (e.g. international friends), their chances to practice English were limited by online learning. The virtual mentoring sessions were one of the few chances they had to interact informally in English.

The shift to online learning also caused other frustrations for the students. Daniel, for example, cited the ‘disturbance’ to his timetable and technical difficulties. This caused uncertainty and reduced his opportunities to enhance English through extra curricula activities and connect with other students.

*I think, first of all [the semester delay] stop my teaching progress because ... when I look at the timetable, the start of the semester 2 is about January, but due to the coronavirus it delayed to February is about nearly one month. I think, it's suddenly. I cannot think certainly, I think it disturb my timetable for conducting other activities. For example, I want to go to the workshops or clubs. And then secondly, online teaching is ... when I first meet, I have experience the difficulties on all my teachers. And then, it costs some time to fix the problem. So, I missed one lecture due to the technology difficulties. I think it's very, uh, frustrating for me.*

Daniel – Interview 3

Despite the affordances of the online mode, all of these students looked forward to the return of face-to-face learning. Jennifer (interview 3), for example, preferred the “*study atmosphere*” of face-to-face learning which could let her “*have the motivation to study*”. Marco (Interview 3) found that he was “*less positive than semester one because ... the online teaching is not so good than the last semester*”. Kara (Interview 3) felt that she had not improved in her English skills except for listening: “*I think not*

*improve, but, uh, it just I can practice listening, I think*". Though she admitted that online learning was convenient and eliminated her 45 minute commute, she wanted to return to the campus to "*feel like a university student*".

To sum up, the adoption of online learning limited informal interactional experiences with teachers and peers. This lack of close contact affected the students. Though they generally spoke Cantonese with peers, the reduced chances to informally clarify points about their subjects, including the English subject, affected their learning. Students also found more distance between themselves and their lecturers and found it hard to communicate with them in spoken English. Online learning caused frustration for these students who were keen to return to the campus. Interaction, motivation to study and the sense of belonging were cited as reasons for wanting to return. Overall, it can be concluded that these students were pushed further onto the periphery as online learning isolated them and their chances to build a support network.

### *6.3.3 Students seemed frustrated because they were not developing their English as much as they had expected*

In Phase 2, it was reported that the focal students struggled to build confidence. In Phase 3, students were frustrated and critical (reported in Theme 2) with the lack of opportunities they were gaining at university to enhance their confidence in speaking. Overall, their confidence with English had not reportedly increased much, however they had reached certain compromises (Theme 3) and were able to connect more with English (Theme 4).

These students appeared to have made improvements in specific areas of their English but some of the old ghosts still haunted them. Zoe, for example, still reported that grammar was holding her back. Kyle had developed his citation skills but was disappointed that his overall English had not improved much. When asked if it had improved in year 1 he responded by staying:

*Maybe the format and the citation style, these types of things. But if you're saying, uh, English learning, I think English is not that much. Yeah.*

Kyle – Interview 3

Kyle had received low grades for his English Centre assessments which had dampened his enthusiasm and confidence. As the English Centre grades appear on the final student transcripts,

Kyle was now pinning his hopes on IELTS to prove his English ability. Marco also seemed frustrated and annoyed that the English subjects had “lowered” his GPA and this had reduced his chances of transferring from a higher diploma course to a full degree. This suggests that English is holding some of these students back rather than enabling them.

Daniel continued to position himself in terms of his DSE result and he still compared himself to students with higher results. His change of pronoun below in the final sentence from ‘I’ to ‘we’ signifies that he still associates himself as being a DSE 3 student. The DSE 3 identity continued to influence his thoughts and potentially had a limiting effect on his English trajectory. Despite this self-doubt, it is reported in Theme 4 that Daniel did manage to become closer to English after his first year studies.

*I think compared to others, I think, I think it's not really good, because compared to others, um, some student, uh, uh, DSE, uh, they achieve their level 4 about the DSE examination. They could speak English fluently and then not really, uh, have any grammar mistake, or they can, uh, very confidence to, uh, speak English. Compared with them, I ... we don't really have good English, yes.*

Daniel – Interview 3

Also comparing himself to other students, Marco felt frustrated because he could not “understand some word that they can understand” (Interview 3). This suggests that Marco still felt behind in his English journey and had retained a deficit identity. Similarly, Anson reported that his English subject grades were lower than his major discipline subject grades. Though Anson held the status of being an ‘EMI’ secondary school student, he suggested that his “English is not really good” and appeared frustrated because despite his long journey with English, he was still experiencing problems with the language. His low English subject results seemed to have compounded a deficit identity. Referring to classmates he said “I think they may be better than me” (Interview 3).

The euphoria of entering university had slowly given way to disappointment and frustration regarding their English learning projects. Overall, it was evident that the participants had not escaped their deficit identities during the first year and for some, low grades and comparisons with other students had compounded these identities. This had caused some frustration as they continued to label themselves as low English achievers and this most likely resulted in a downwards adjustment of learning trajectories with English.



#### 6.3.4 Theme 1 summary

The theme has reported the sense of frustration that curdled from many of the struggles the participants had met and were not able to remedy. Lack of self-expression was one such struggle which continued to afflict the focal students, and they were not able to build the vocabulary range and fully attune to academic register to resolve this issue. Though they appeared to be winning the battle in the shift to inductive learning, the change in mode to online learning dampened their motivation, connection building, avenues for support, and sense of belonging. The struggle to shift lanes on their identity projects was also met with frustration as some received low English grades and most continued to see themselves as low English achievers.

#### 6.4 Theme 2: Criticism

During the first two data collection phases, students did not display strong outward criticism of their experiences at university. In semester 1, the students appeared to be more self-critical, as in they experienced pressure and understood that they were lacking in their English abilities in dealing with EMI at university. However, at the end of the academic year, they became more outwardly critical in some of their responses. Their criticisms were especially directed at the lack of speaking opportunities, which was made worse by online learning, and the English levels of their lecturers. Theme 2 captures the students growing sense of criticism on their EMI experience as they became more familiar with this context.

##### 6.4.1 Students were critical of the lack of speaking opportunities

During the Phase 1 data collection, students reported feeling hopeful about enhancing their speaking and confidence in authentic contexts. The Phase 2 results revealed that the students were disappointed with the lack of social speaking opportunities and their confidence improved only incrementally. The Phase 3 results show that some of this disappointment turned into criticism. This criticism was partly directed at the university for not providing enough opportunities. For example, Zoe reflected on the Orientation Camp which was held at the beginning of the academic year. This one-day on-campus activity is designed to integrate new students into the university, their departments and peers. Zoe (Interview 2), however, was critical that she “*only can know the local students*”. Daniel, one of the most positive and proactive students was also critical of the Orientation Camp and the lack of international students:

*[This university] should conduct some activities, for example, orientation camp for international students because I when I joined the O-Camp and there is literally zero international student conduct our, will conduct the O-camp and then, and it cannot, and so, in order to, rise the relationship between international student and local student, I think it is important for international students will join the O-Camp.*

Daniel – Interview 3

For Marco, the perceived lack of international students was one of the main reasons to leave the university after his first year of study. Marco planned to retake his school exams in the hope of attaining higher grades and a place at a different university, one that he perceived as a more prestigious institution. He related the number of international students to the ranking of the university, equating higher-ranked universities with more international students.

**Andrew:** *Yeah, so you, because you, your hoping to go to UST, so do you see that -*

**Marco:** *Yeah.*

**Andrew:** *- as a better, like a better university and a, like a better subject to learn.*

**Marco:** *Yeah, I see there are many foreign student in UST than [this university].*

**Andrew:** *Mm, okay. Why do you think the [foreign] students go to UST rather than our university?*

**Marco:** *I think, uh, maybe the ranking. UST is higher so*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Marco:** *And then the praises, the praise is up.*

Marco - Interview 3

Daniel lamented the fact that there were 'no opportunities' to communicate with international students. In the extract below, he blames this on the international students who did not join any of the activities he attended. Like many of the others, Daniel was critical that international students 'join lectures together and sit together'. This separation of local and international students reduced the already minimal opportunities for practising spoken English. Daniel had reported some positive interactions with international students in halls during semester 1, but with Covid-19, he was forced to move back with his parents which further reduced his opportunities to meet international students.

**Andrew:** *Do you feel like you've, um, built up your social network or have you had enough chances to make friends with the international students?*

**Daniel:** *Mmm, honestly, I don't think it's sufficient because I think, uh, because unfortunately, I live at home so there is no opportunity for us to, uh, uh, communicate with international students, because they will not join our activities.*

Daniel – Interview 3

Kyle was critical of the lack of international students in his department. From the mentoring sessions it was clear that he thought that it was the university's role to enrol international students. Like Daniel, Kyle felt that there was a divide between the local and international students. Below, Kyle shows his criticism that international students do not mix with local students and are "*playing on their side*". The focal students most likely did not have the cultural capital and confidence to initiate and sustain new friendships with the international students. Lower proficiency students may especially be less confident to initiate interactions. As Ryan suggested, speaking firstly requires "*courage*" and then "*you're not sure whether others will understand you*" (Interview 3).

*ITC do not have that much international student. I think we've just got five to six and they just play on their side.*

Kyle – Interview 3

Kyle also focused his criticism on the lecturers' management of international students when facilitating learning activities. According to Kyle, his lecturers did not group him with any international students during learning activities in year 1, and this reduced his exposure to these students. To make things worse, Covid-19 ended any chances for Kyle to meet international students. As Kyle put it: *"now we're going for our online lesson, it's definitely making the chance, the percentage, close to zero"* (Interview 3). Daniel corroborates this view of online learning by suggesting that students mainly use the chat function to interact.

**Daniel:** *Uh, I think in, uh, online teaching, we don't have time to speak English because we only type our question in words and then to ask the professor, and the professor will type in and then to ask and then to reply, uh, our questions.*

Daniel – Interview 3

Anson lamented that he only spoke English during presentations and not during informal learning situations (Interview 3). This was a common experience for all the participants. Students tend to script their presentations in discipline subjects and therefore they are not regarded as a chance to enhance fluency and interaction. Contrasting his English classes to his discipline subjects, Marco found that there was *"not the need for us to speak in English in other [discipline] subject"* (Interview 3). This view was corroborated by all of the focal students who listened to English in their major subjects but rarely spoke it in class. Lecturers' management of international students and of English discussions in class came under fire from these students.

Overall, students reported minimal chances to practice and enhance spoken English over year 1 at university, and were increasingly critical of the lack of opportunities. The lack of international students and opportunities to meet these students was one of the biggest criticisms, with the blame placed on the university. International students themselves came under criticism for not engaging with the local students. The participants also criticised lecturers for not integrating different students during learning activities, and for not providing speaking opportunities in class. As Cantonese is the natural social language at this university, these results show the importance of exposure to international students and the responsibility of the university and lecturers to provide opportunities for local and international students to meet.

#### 6.4.2 Students were critical of their lecturers' English levels

All of the students reported that at least some, if not all of their lecturers had low levels of English. This issue came to the surface during many of the mentoring sessions and interviews. Students were more critical as the year progressed as they realised that lectures were the main source of English input (as social opportunities were limited). Ryan (Interview 3) summed it up by saying “*The level of using English is high ... but you say the overall quality, I'm not so sure*”. Ryan here is referring to the fact that his instructors use English to lecture but the quality of their English is questionable. Daniel, below, recounts the difficulties he experienced in one of his classes and would even prefer his lecturer to use Mandarin. Daniel found that his lecturer's English was “*very, very bad*” which cost him study time.

*I cannot know what about he say, and then ... I prefer him to say Mandarin [than] the English because the English is very, very bad and then some of keywords I cannot hear and then he costs me for watching the video again and then ... my time is lost by this kind of because I think he needs to improve the English as well.*

Daniel – Interview 3

In the quote above, Daniel suggests that lecturers need to improve their English “*as well*”. This was a sea-change for some of the students who during the first research phases were more self-critical about their own English levels and saw it as their responsibility to enhance their proficiency levels. In this final research phase, some students realised that the responsibility of successful EMI education also rests on the lecturers. These students were therefore more outwardly critical of their lecturers' English as their first year journey progressed. This could be interpreted as students shifting their positionality and increasing their agency by not placing the blame of unsuccessful learning experiences solely on themselves.

In the extract below, Daniel is critical that his professors are “*not really good at English*” which caused “*misunderstanding*” of the lecture content. Though the focal students continued to hold a preference for English instruction, Daniel's frustration (“*we always get stuck*”) is evident below as he suggests that Chinese instruction would have benefitted his content knowledge more. Daniel suggests that effective English instruction is part of the “*principle*” of EMI education. This goes to show that the struggle for students is not only with their own proficiency levels but also dealing with the proficiency levels of their lecturers. This feeling came out much more strongly in this final phase.

**Andrew:** *I've asked you this question before, but are you still happy that the university teaches everything in English or would you prefer some lessons to be in Cantonese or Mandarin?*

**Daniel:** *I think in this semester because our professors is not really good in English, I prefer them to teach in Mandarin or even Cantonese, to gain more, to achieve more, in order to obtain the understanding of the student. Because some of the student also complains that the lecturers do not have very good English.*

*And then, you know, some of the student will misunderstanding the lecturers. For example, the professors that, when we do some kind of theories ... then always some of the student we stuck. We stuck in some of the knowledge.*

**Andrew:** *Hmm, yeah, okay.*

**Daniel:** *They just don't.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah. So it's more to do with the learning, the knowledge. What if your lecturers spoke very good English, would you -*

**Daniel:** *I think, speak in good English, I think is okay. I think is acceptable. Because, I think the responsibility of the lecturer is to achieve, is to obtain, is to provide good learning environment to students. I think this kind of thing is the principle. So I think they need to improve their English to ... fulfil the principles.*

Daniel – Interview 3

In Phase 3, Kyle also laid more blame on the lecturers for not providing a quality EMI experience. According to Kyle, it is the lecturers' proficiency levels which “*makes us hard to understand*”. This is in contrast the self-blame for any lack of understanding which was more evident in Phase 2.

**Kyle:** *... I think for ... instead of saying English teaching affect the teaching quality to us, is saying that, uh, it's affecting their teaching quality to the professor. As the some ... most of the professor*

*are not a native speaker to English. So they may-- it's hard to pronounce well, deliver well in what they want to put, uh, say to us. So that make us hard to understand but it's the key, I think.*

Kyle – Interview 3

For Anson, the impact of his lecturers' English was on his motivation. As he put it "*when I listen, I don't really know what he say so I don't have passion to listen him talk English*" (Anson, Interview 3). Zoe was also critical of her lecturers' English proficiency and especially their tone of speaking. She commented that "*the content that they speak is boring and the tone that they speak is also boring*" (Interview 3). The English levels of lecturers therefore appears to not only affect content understanding but also motivation.

This sub-theme shows criticism of the proficiency levels of lecturers which caused misunderstanding and boredom for students. In this final phase, the students were more outwardly critical as they expected more from their lecturers. The students also realised that they were not the only ones to blame for unsuccessful learning experiences in English. These students were still supportive of English instruction but they were increasingly critical that the university was not keeping its end of the bargain: to provide quality education in English. There was a perception that lecturers needed to enhance their English to 'fulfil the principle' of EMI education.

#### 6.4.3 Theme 2 summary

By the end of their first year, the students were becoming more critical of their EMI experience. These students' attitudes of EMI at university appeared to change from idealism (Phase 1) to disappointment (Phase 2) to criticism (Phase 3). Criticism was directed at the university for not providing enough opportunities, international students for not mixing, and lecturers for not managing the English experience and for not having high enough proficiency levels.

### 6.5 Theme 3: Compromise

At the start of their university careers, these students held high hopes for their English journeys. However, during their first semester, disappointment settled in as they were not gaining enough social English and confidence boosting experiences. In Phase 3, the results show a more prominent difference between students' expectations and their actual university experience. This difference was

channelled in two ways: Theme 2 discussed how students were becoming more critical in their views about their EMI experience, Theme 3 shows that students were also reaching compromises in their expectations. Compromise relates to the adjustment of views by lowering expectations, accepting a particular situation, or coming to a new understanding. This section will report two main areas related to the theme of compromise. Firstly, as these students reached the end of their first year experience, they became more realistic in their attitudes towards their English development. This meant that they accepted a slower rate of English enhancement. Secondly, some students began to understand the challenges of EMI education from different stakeholders, and this new understanding resulted in them lowering their expectations and becoming more accepting of the form of EMI they were experiencing.

#### 6.5.1 Students reached a compromise about their English development

As the students struggled with English in year 1, they gained more experience and self-awareness about their proficiency level. By the end of the year, many of the students became more realistic about their learning trajectories. The Phase 2 results showed that all of the students only felt that they had improved in English incrementally or not at all. The overall sense was one of disappointment at this mid-stage. In Phase 3, many of the students had lowered their English expectations.

Kara's goal at the start of university was to "*speak like native speakers*" (Reflection 1) but by the end of year 1, she had realised that this goal was hard to achieve. In the extract below, Kara maintains a positive tone stating that although she cannot speak English fluently, she made advancements in listening. Kara seemed to take this as a win and had reached a compromise about her language enhancement.

*I do not think I can speak English fluently but at least my listening is improved a lot and I have a smooth communication with foreign people. This is a big encouragement to me. I hope that in the next semester I can improve more in writing and speaking.*

Kara – Reflection 3

Leo, who had expected "*great improvement*" (Reflection 1) in his English had also toned down his language goals. In Phase 3, Leo's goal was to use English "*without the help of Google translate or Grammarly*" (Reflection 3). Like Kara, Leo seemed to be more at ease with his English development and perhaps the burden of holding grand goals had been alleviated. In the extract below, Leo suggests that he 'knows more about himself' and that his English is "*not that poor*". Leo had



compromised on the goal of 'great improvement' in his English, but was happy to accept that he was "*still better than some people*".

**Leo:** *After getting into university, interest for me to use English is become more often. So, I maybe know more about myself.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Leo:** *Yeah, I know where the standard that I have, so I start to think that actually, I'm not that poor. [laughs]*

**Andrew:** *Yeah, okay. Good.*

**Leo:** *Yeah, I'm still better than some people, yeah, in English, so that is my confidence.*

Leo – interview 3

Some students were less positive about lowering their expectations for developing English at university. In Phase 1 it was reported that Daniel wanted to "*stand out*" but in Phase 3 had reduced his expectations. It is clear from the extract below that he has set a low target so as not to become disappointed with any lack of progress. This suggests that Daniel is lowering his imagined trajectory with English. Other students made similar comments, for example, Kyle said "*I do not have much expectations for the English*" (Interview 3) and Christine appeared more ambivalent toward her English development: "*I just feel, whatever English I need from three years is fine for me*" (Interview 3).

*My expectation is very low because, uh, my English skills, my English level is not really good. And then I don't I so I set my target is not very high because I when I set a high target I cannot achieve that. Uh, when ... when, and then, uh, what I expect is that I can communicate with others.*

Daniel – Interview 3

In summary, some students had reached a more nuanced view of their English development by the end of the academic year. The students' high expectations upon entering the university had given way to a more realistic view and they had lowered their expectations. It seems likely that the students had become familiar with the university and learning culture, and were therefore better able to set more realistic goals. The disappointment reported in Phase 2 seems to have led them to compromise on their hopes and goals.

#### *6.5.2 Reaching a compromise in the EMI experience*

Despite holding critical views towards their discipline lecturers' English proficiency, some students (including ones who were critical towards their lecturers) also empathised with their lecturers on the EMI issue. This suggests that the students were developing multiple perspectives on their EMI experience. These students understood that their lecturers were also struggling with English medium policies which were top-down led. In the extract below, Leo recognised that his lecturers were "*forced to use English*" and suggests that the lecturers need to persevere with English despite their "*wrong pronunciation*". Leo reaches the compromise that the lectures are not only an opportunity for students to practice English, but also for lecturers. Leo understood that his lecturers were also trying hard to deal with EMI policies and he was willing to lower his expectations regarding the quality of his English experience. This view conflicts with Theme 2 in which it was reported that it was the lecturers' job to provide an effective EMI experience for students. This suggests that students held complex and conflicting perspectives on their EMI experience.

**Leo:** *I can feel that his English language skills is not so good.*

**Andrew:** *Okay.*

**Leo:** *But yeah, he's forced to use English. So even though his grammar is wrong or some pronunciation is wrong.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Leo:** *But he is still using English -*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Leo:** - *and I am trying very hard. So all this is, I don't know, for me and for him, that's a way to practice English maybe.*

Leo – Interview 3

Kyle also tried to understand the impact of the university's English medium policy from the teacher perspective. In the quote below, Kyle reflects that although some Cantonese instruction would facilitate learning, lecturers need to “*think about the foreign students*” and use English to make the classes “*fair*”. This suggests that Kyle is willing to compromise on his study experience (preferring teachers to give some explanations in Cantonese) for the belief that English brings fairness to all students. The concept of fairness is a powerful persuasive argument and reflects an ideological belief that English is a language equally accessible by all. For students who have no international students in their classes, however, this argument is less persuasive.

**Kyle:** *My feeling is that I think a lot ... I think using English as a teaching medium is an essential thing as Hong Kong is an international city... I think it could be better if the professor can somehow using Cantonese and explain some of the difficult term. They would help but sometimes they need to think about - think about our foreign students. If they want to make this to be more fair they should use English.*

Kyle – Interview 3

For some students, having lecturers with a low proficiency level took some pressure off them. This was because the perceived expectation on students to produce high-level English was lower. Ryan, below, comments that his lecturers ‘don’t mind his sentences’ and they focus on the message; meaning that his teachers do not pay attention to grammar mistakes. This helped Ryan to feel more comfortable. Ryan therefore compromised on his EMI experience (i.e. the lecturers’ quality of English) for the perceived lower language demands of these lecturers and subsequently lower pressure levels.

**Ryan:** *Yeah, they wouldn't mind your ... your sentence. They only focus on what do you want to know, what you want to ask?*

Ryan – Interview 3

Similarly, Kyle commented that his lecturers' English use was "*manageable*". He contrasted this with his English teachers ("*you guys*") whom he viewed as having more complex English. This suggests that Kyle felt that English used by his discipline teachers was lower level and easier to deal with. Like Ryan, Kyle appears to concede on more complex English use and take the gains of lower pressure and a more manageable experience.

**Kyle:** *I think the professor may not get in the same English like you guys, so still manageable.*

Kyle – Interview 3

Zoe reported (below) that the use of Cantonese as the social language had been positive for her. It is probable that using English for the social as well as academic aspects of her university experience would have been overwhelming. Expectations in Phase 1 to fully immerse in English were lowered to a more realistic level and Zoe saw the value of using both languages.

**Andrew:** *Yeah. Okay. So it seems like it's a bit of a balance, like the lectures are in English, the reading and the assessments are in English, but a lot of the social side is in Cantonese. Is that right?*

**Zoe:** Yes.

**Andrew:** *And is that good? Do you like that balance?*

**Zoe:** *Um, I think the balance is okay 'cause I'm not speaking English all the time. Um, but also don't speak Chinese ... Cantonese all the time.*

Zoe – Interview 3

Like many of the other students, Zoe had not had any experiences with international students in semester 2. While being critical of the lack of opportunities with international students, Zoe also reflected positively on this. From Zoe's perspective, interacting with international students is useful, but takes more time. Not working with international students meant that Zoe could focus more on her studies. The two views of usefulness and time are represented in the quotes below. In semester 2, Zoe was willing to compromise on her high hopes to mix with international students to instead focus on her studies.

**Zoe:** *I think speaking to, uh, the international student is a great opportunity for us to train up the speaking skills.*

[...]

**Zoe:** *Um, I think it's good that, uh, I've not communicate with the international student in semester two because in semester two is really busy.*

Zoe – Interview 3

With the heavy workload, it was clear that the students were looking for ways to ease their first year journey. Zoe, above, found it more efficient not to work with international students. From a different perspective, some students from EMI schooling backgrounds reported that using English for writing was easier and less time-consuming than Chinese. This was not because they found English easy but because Chinese was difficult for them. Marco, for example, stated that “*I don't mind [English] because I don't know how to type in Chinese*” (Interview 3) and Jennifer reported that “*I think English is better because I write English words faster than Chinese*” (Interview 3). Additionally, Zoe, who was mainly CMI schooled stated that “*after year 1, I think, um, read English is more - it is more easy than reading Chinese for me*”. This suggests that one of the reasons why these students were willing to accept EMI was because they did not possess the Chinese literacy skills required to study at the university level. The alternative of Chinese instruction was therefore not inviting for these students. This relates to the idea of language dispossession (Phillipson, 2017) and that Hong Kong's language policies have resulted in weak literacy skills across the languages. As mentioned in Section 3.9, only 57.9% of day school students reached a Level 3 or above in the HKDSE Chinese exam which is similar to the English exam (53.8%). The goal of language accumulation in English has most likely resulted in language dispossession in Chinese. As Christine put it “*I don't care whether it's Chinese or English because both of them I'm not very good at*” (Interview 3).

Many of the focal students had reached some compromises by the end of their first year EMI journey. Students generally held more complex views of EMI and understood that lecturers also faced major hurdles in complying with EMI policies. Some students felt that the lower proficiency lecturers offered some respite in English language demands and some found that Cantonese as a social language offered a more manageable experience. Lastly, there was some evidence to suggest that English was accepted as the academic lingua franca because of a lack of Chinese literacy skills.

### 6.5.3 Theme 3 summary

The theme of compromise has represented the more complex and realistic views the focal students held towards their EMI experience as they became more familiar with the study environment. Students firstly reached more compromises in their own English development as they realised that the high hopes they had held at the beginning of university would not be realised. This led them to set lower trajectories regarding their English goals. Secondly, some students had reached compromises in their expectations about the EMI experience provided by the university. Through their learning experiences, they came to understand that EMI provision is a complex issue for all stakeholders involved. The disappointment reported during Phase 2 had manifested into students more readily accepting their EMI experience even though it was not meeting their expectations.

The themes of criticism (Theme 2) and compromise (Theme 3) have demonstrated that the participants held evolving, conflicting and multi-perspective views on their EMI experience. Though some students may have been more critical or more accepting, it was evident that all of the students held critical feelings and all had reached some compromises by the end of their first year. This was part of the tension and lived reality the students experienced as they contended with English at university.

## 6.6 Theme 4: Connection

This theme captures the increasing sense of connection these students felt towards English. In Phase 1, it was reported that these students felt distance from English due to the lack of early opportunities and the test-based education system. This had left them little opportunity to use English as a real-life skill. In Phase 2, it was reported that the students felt pressure and disappointment, and they struggled with English. In Phase 3, despite feeling frustrated, critical and reaching compromises in their hopes for university, these students reported more connection with English. This was a surprising result and adds to the complex range of emotions the students experienced over their first year. Connection is defined as closeness or affinity with English and is the opposite of the feeling of detachment.

### *6.6.1 Students connected with English more because they viewed it as a real-life skill and not only an academic subject*

Despite not having the speaking and social opportunities they had hoped for, many of the participants reported feeling more comfortable and close to English after their first year of university study. This is significant because these students reported feeling disconnection with English during their schooling. One of the ways in which they had changed was through how they perceived English. It can be seen from Zoe's quote below that her view of English shifted from being solely a subject to a skill for communication.

**Zoe:** *Um, I feel ... I feel I'm connected to English because, um, before attending to the university, I think, um, English is ... it's just a requirement for me to fulfil, but, um, after the uni ... But after attend to the university, I think, um, English is a skill for me to communicate with the others.*

**Andrew:** *Mm-hmm. Okay.*

**Zoe:** *It's not only a subject.*

Zoe – Interview 3

Similarly, Ryan states below how he is now learning for 'knowledge' and 'communication' which is different from the detached way he learnt English at school. It was reported in Phase 1 that these students lamented the test-based approach at school but at university, they could see more value in English because it connected to real-life experiences.

**Ryan:** *In primary school or secondary school, I learned English just for the examination and quizzes because the teacher don't tell us what is the usage of learning English.*

**Andrew:** *Hmm.*

**Ryan:** *They just ask you to-- we learn that vocabulary, learn tenses and grammar, but what can I do after learning the English well?*

**Andrew:** *Hmm.*

**Ryan:** *But I found it in university, I learn for communication, for knowing about the knowledge and communicate with others, yeah.*

Ryan – Interview 3

Ryan's connection with English at university came with the realisation that he was learning for himself and not others. This is very different from the alienation he felt from English at school which he described as being "*just for the examination*".

**Ryan:** *At that time, I think English is just for the examination.*

**Andrew:** *Hmm, yeah.*

**Ryan:** *But right now, I think it's for me, instead of for others.*

Ryan – Interview 3

Kara also found that she was more self-motivated to invest in English at university. For Kara, English had become more "*familiar*" and this had helped her to feel closer to the language. In the quote below, Kara contrasts her experience at secondary school where she was "*forced*" to learn English, to university where she is more "*willing*" to learn by herself.

**Kara:** *I think is, is like, I need to forced to learn that language but not from ... but not my, like I want just, like I want to really willing, willing want to learn by myself.*

Kara – Interview 3

It was evident from the mentoring sessions and interviews that these students were starting to view English as a language and not only a school subject. The most significant reason for the shift in



perception was that at school English was used for test-preparation, and at university they were using English in more varied and authentic ways (but still not to the extent they had hoped for). Along with this change was the view that English was for themselves and not for something external (e.g. teachers or exams). Though there was still clearly external pressure on these students (e.g. assessments / GPA), viewing English as a language for themselves was a step which helped them to feel more connection with the language.

#### 6.6.2 Students began to feel less afraid to communicate in English

Though these students did not report major advances in their language proficiency, most of them were more willing to take risks with English. This aided their confidence and connection with the language. Jason reflects below that he is not afraid of speaking English now and his fear of reading academic articles has been reduced.

*I think my English is enhanced over year 1 because I do not afraid of speaking English and could speak English naturally sometimes. Moreover, I learn academic writing skills and could reduce the fear of reading academic journals articles.*

Daniel - Reflection 3

Daniel goes on to say that he needed to break the “*mental problem*” about speaking English. Here he is referring to the fear of speaking. Below he suggests that breaking the fear of speaking was a process that took time.

**Andrew:** *Hm. Yeah, it sounds like a kind of breakthrough moment when you decided that you have to take some risks and just try to speak, and that's the way to really develop your confidence. Is that right?*

**Daniel:** *Uh, yes. I think it's a procedure, I think it's also a transition because it costs some time for this transition because I need to break the mental problem about speak English.*

Daniel – Interview 3

Kara was another student who reported more willingness to try to communicate despite continuing to rate her English proficiency as low. Kara relayed that her confidence had not gone up significantly, but she was more willing to communicate with people in English. This quote suggests that Kara is less self-conscious with English and more open to taking risks.

**Kara:** *I think, um, yes. I can say not a really big improve, but at least is willing to talk with them even my English is still like that, but I just can overcome it and then try to present my idea.*

Kara – Interview 3

In the excerpt below, Leo also appears to feel distance from English and reports feeling “*more comfortable to speak English*”. This again is a significant change from Leo’s comments in Phase 1 about being judged and labelled “*weak*”. Like the others, Leo did not feel that he had improved much in his proficiency, but he no longer felt fearful of speaking with others.

**Leo:** *For me, uh, for now, I feel more comfortable to speak English.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Leo:** *Yeah, definitely. When some kind of people speak English to you and you speak it, then you speak English to respond or to talk to them.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah.*

**Leo:** *It's definitely, uh ... I don't feel any matter.*

Leo – Interview 3

In summary, some of the students reported feeling less afraid to use English and more willing to try to communicate. This appeared to be a gradual process as they gained more experience with English and tried to overcome the ‘mental barrier’ of fear of speaking. Feeling more comfortable with English is an indicator that they were beginning to experience more connection with English.

### 6.6.3 Students connected with English via non-university experiences

Some of the participants found alternative (non-university) opportunities to enhance their English and these experiences brought them closer to English. Kara, for example, found work in a Japanese restaurant where she spoke to some of the customers in English and which enabled her to “*practice a lot*”. This experience helped her to feel closer to English because she used English in a conversational way. In fact, Kara admitted that she had enhanced her English more from her part-time job than her lectures because “*their conversation is more like normal conversations and then not really professional words*”. The quote below suggests that Kara is developing more affinity with English.

**Kara:** *Right now I'm working in the restaurant and then I also, uh, contact with a lot of foreign customers. So which make me feel English is close to me anyway.*

Kara – Interview 3

During semester 2, Ryan took a part-time job as an assistant to some network engineers. In this role he found that English was widely used for programming, instruction manuals, websites and dealing with customers. This experience resulted in a breakthrough moment for Ryan as he “*realize that the area you use English is not inside school – it's around the world*” (Interview 3). Another revelation for Ryan was that he observed how the engineers used English as best they could to do their jobs despite their low proficiency levels. Observing this gave Ryan more confidence and motivation because he realised that he did not need to use English perfectly in professional settings. He contrasts this with his schooling experience which was more judgmental on his grammar. The quote below gives further evidence to the theme of connection because Ryan feels less embarrassed about his English and more willing to express his ideas the best he can.

**Ryan:** *Well, I get a part-time job recently and I worked with them [network engineers], I saw that although this, the colleagues not have a, not familiar with English, but they would try their best to communicate with their customers.*

**Andrew:** *Hmm.*

**Ryan:** *I think, I think it's like your motivation. You try your best, you do what you want. I think it's more important than the examinations or tests.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah, yeah.*

**Ryan:** *I don't feel embarrassed and, yeah.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah. That's good. Yeah. So that's ... that work experience has, um, has it made you feel a bit more relaxed about English then?*

**Ryan:** *Yes.*

**Andrew:** *Hmm. Yeah.*

**Ryan:** *When you communicate with others, they don't care your accent, your-your grammar, they-they only wanna know your ideas and what you're talking and you're thinking, yes.*

**Andrew:** *Hmm. Yeah. So is that a big difference from secondary school?*

**Ryan:** *Yes, in secondary school, they focus on your grammar, your tenses, and are you correct or not. I think the, the judgment is very ... like you feel half feeling. Yeah.*

Ryan – Interview 3

Leo also found a part-time job and worked for a small accounting company. He needed to help his boss who had a low English proficiency and Leo reported that his English had improved from this experience. For Kyle, church offered more social English experiences than university. He spoke informally with church friends and attended conversation classes organised by his church. Leo and Anson used online gaming as a way to communicate in English with gamers around the globe. Most of the focal students reported watching English TV series and films via online streaming services. Jennifer, Kyle and Anson (Interview 3) specifically referred to Netflix which had more English viewing options than Cantonese. Kyle even commented that Netflix had had a bigger impact on his English than his university studies. As the students were largely homebound during semester 2 due to Covid-19, it seems inevitable that they would go online for entertainment.

To sum up, some of the students found English opportunities outside the university and this aided their connection with English. Experiencing English in real-life contexts helped these students to see English being used naturally and imperfectly and this gave them confidence.

#### 6.6.4 Theme 4 summary

For these participants, lack of opportunities to connect with English in early life, and the schooling experience which demanded perfection in tests (reported in Phase 1), set up barriers to English. Though the students reported minimal improvement in their proficiency, over year 1 they were beginning to view English differently, and this was helping to break down barriers and reduce the distance from English. Ways in which these students developed more connection with English included viewing it as a language, and not as a subject, taking more risks, and being less self-critical and less fearful of social judgement about their English. The gradual connection to English was a process with mental hurdles the students needed to overcome. The participants reported minimal social English experiences at university and Covid-19 had reduced their chances even further. However, they managed to find ways to enhance their exposure to English. Increasing their experience of English, studying for themselves rather something external, and seeing English being used in professional settings by less proficient users were ways in which the students had begun to address the detachment from English they had held at the beginning of university.

#### 6.7 Theme 5: Promise

The Phase 3 results provide further evidence of these students' belief in the promise of English. This promise was unshaken over the academic year, and even intensified as they witnessed more use of English and recognised its value in different contexts. During Phase 3, the participants largely reported similar views to the previous phases, for example, the practical use of English for their careers and futures. Some students had developed more complex views towards English as through their year 1 experiences, they were better able to view the use of English from different stakeholders. However, there were no criticisms of the promise of English despite their struggles at university, and they continued to hold the belief that English would bring value, status and mobility.

##### 6.7.1 Students continued to believe that English held instrumental value

Like in previous phases, these students continued to believe that English would bring practical value in their studies and lives. One example cited by Leo below is the amount of English information online.

**Leo:** *Yeah, so it's very useful, and definitely there's, uh, many useful thing, many useful, yeah, many useful thing will happen -*

**Andrew:** *Yeah*

**Leo:** *- if you use English.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah, yeah.*

**Leo:** *And as I said, yeah, when you're searching in Google -*

**Andrew:** *Sure, yeah.*

**Leo:** *- in English, there's more information, yeah.*

Leo – Interview 3

Similarly, Christine recognised that English is a dominant language in computer programming. When asked if it would be more effective to hold her classes in Cantonese, Christine was unsure but seemed to find English more advantageous because the language of computer programming is English.

*I have discuss with my friends whether laboratory, like the computing programming, should be using English. Using Chinese seems to be more easy in understanding, but the programming is just in English to type. Therefore, using English might be an advantage. I don't know.*

Christine – Interview 3

In semester 2, Christine experienced two sides of EMI education: English appeared to have practical relevance in her computer programming class, on the other hand, English had less relevance to Christine's Chinese history class by adding another layer of translation (discussed in Theme 1).

Marco (Interview 3) found that information related to his assignments was more available in English than Chinese. This probably encouraged Marco to view English as having high practical use.

**Marco** *Yeah. Only if ... some are- in some Chinese article is not very academic, I think.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah. Do your lecturers use Chinese sources at all, like Chinese academic sources?*

**Marco:** *Mm, no. I think teacher mostly use English sources.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah, okay. Yeah. Why do you think your lecturers used only English sources and not Chinese sources?*

**Marco:** *Mm, I think English sources is more accurate.*

Marco – Interview 3

Marco admitted that his lecturers do not readily use Chinese sources because English sources are more “*accurate*”. Therefore as well as the volume of information in English, the quality was also deemed higher. This view was shared by Zoe who thought that “*English provide more knowledge than Chinese source*”. It may be that these students’ lecturers are using sources from the higher-ranking journals which are more commonly published in English. The practical use of English for accessing research is tied to the belief that knowledge production in English is more trustworthy and rigorous. This can be related to neoliberalism and the idea that English is a high-ranking language. English is a way for academics to publish in high-ranking journals, thus increasing their own profiles and the profiles of their institutions. Research in English is then potentially more valued than research in other languages.

Kyle agreed with the other students that English held practical value and saw that English would help him connect and interact with people outside Hong Kong. This was a commonly held belief among the students and despite the lack of contact with international students, the year 1 experience did not seem to affect this view.

*And I think since now many people are using English in the world, I think it's, uh, very important tool for us to getting more connections with the world, so apart from saying in the practical way, English also important tool for us to get more interactions with different people.*

Kyle – Interview 3

Students continued to hold strong views that English would be useful in professional settings. Anson commented that practising English at university would help to prepare him for future work situations where he would need English. As reported in Phase 2, the promise of English was seen by many of these participants as more important than the ease of learning through Cantonese instruction. Anson appears to maintain this view. This shows the strength of the neoliberal view as English as capital and demonstrates the pressures these students are under to increase their linguistic capital at university.

*I think what it's like uh, teaching in Cantonese is always easy to follow. But I think when we go to work and graduate most of the company, they just, they send email by English and they have some projects that also use English. So, we may practice this in our university so we can easy for our future.*

Alex – Interview 3

Overall, the belief in the value of English was not shaken over the students' first year. At school, these students saw English as detached from their lives but increasingly viewed it as essential to getting into university. At university, though not fully immersed in English, the students required it for their subjects and assessments, and witnessed the practical need for English in different situations (e.g. internship, exchange, future careers). These experiences reinforced the belief that English would be a valuable future commodity.

#### *6.7.2 Students continued to believe that investment in English would be rewarded by increased status*

Like in previous phases, students valued the use of English as the medium of instruction and one of the reasons for this was the status it brings. Below, Leo seems to enjoy the status of studying in English because it feels like a 'high-class' international language. This was a typical view of the focal students. Even though they did not always appear to enjoy English, and struggled with the language, they enjoyed the status that English ascribed them. This positive endorsement on their identities was a major factor why they continued to pursue English.

**Leo:** *English actually is as good as Cantonese.*



**Andrew:** *Yeah, okay. Seems that you like it as much as ... you like using it as much as using Cantonese.*

**Leo:** *Yeah, because it's ... English seems more high class.*

**Andrew:** *Okay.*

**Leo:** *Yeah.*

**Andrew:** *Than Cantonese?*

**Leo:** *Than Cantonese, than Cantonese. I think than Cantonese.*

**Andrew:** *Because it's used by more people?*

**Leo:** *Yeah. More international.*

Leo – Interview 3

To bring evidence to the idea that English promises to increase the status of those who possess it, Marco decided to leave the university and retake his school exams in a bid to secure a place at a higher-ranking institution. It was reported in Phase 2, and was a general perception of these students, that the high-ranking universities in Hong Kong have a better reputation among employers. One of the reasons for this was because these institutions were perceived to have more opportunities for internationalisation and their graduates were seen to have a better command of English. Marco, below, suggests that graduating from a better university would tip the balance when it came to securing employment. Marco's comments show his awareness that he is in a ranking-based system. By attending a higher-ranking university, he hopes to gain more status which will lead to increased competitiveness.

**Andrew:** *Do you think if you completed a degree at UST you will have a better chance to find a job?*

**Marco:** *Mm, yeah. I think the ranking of UST is higher and, uh, than [this university]. Maybe UST more I think.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah -*

**Marco:** *Than [this university].*

**Andrew:** *Do, do you think that employers look at ranking, is that important to them?*

**Marco:** *Mm, I think if the two employee are similar they will look at, uh, university ranking.*

Marco – Interview 3

I noticed that by the end of year 1, these students held multi-perspective views towards English (reported in Theme 3). In the conversation below, Daniel illuminates the issue of EMI from his perspective, and the university's. Though Daniel preferred teaching to be in Cantonese, he understood that the university needed to attract international students and teach in English to maintain a good ranking. Daniel also perceived that employers relied on the rankings to make hiring decisions, and the higher the ranking, the more 'commendation' the graduates will receive. Daniel's comments show that he is aware of the desires of different stakeholders. The comments also show that Daniel is connecting ranking and status, and the use of the word "*objective*" suggests that he trusts these ranking systems. This perception connects with the neoliberal notion that rankings are objective assessments of the worth of universities and the graduates they produce. The higher the ranking, the more status and opportunities gained.

**Daniel:** *Uh, personally, I, think I will prefer Cantonese because Cantonese is my mother tongue, and then I could, uh, gain more understanding, rather than to gain your understanding in English. But in the, uh, in the perspective of [this university], because it is a diverse, it is an international university, uh, in order to obtain and then to maintain the good international level and the ranking, I think it need to achieve the English medium, uh, in order to maintain it's good international levels I think. So in this perspective, I think the, uh, the lecturers need to speak in English.*

**Andrew:** *Yeah. Well, that's, you've just, uh, basically, yeah, summarised the whole problem, yeah. Because learning might be easier in Cantonese, but the university has to compete with other*

*international universities as well. Um, but for you, it sounds like you prioritise learning over the university ranking. Is that right?*

**Daniel:** *I think university ranking is also important because some of the employers will rely on the ranking to deliberate the qualities of the student, as in this or others, uh, university, because the ranking produce there, all objective, uh, objective, probably lots of parameters to, uh, assess the levels or to compare the levels above like the HKU or [this university's] students.*

*And then, when, when the, uh, university level increases, and then the comments will be increased, then the graduates also will be commended as positive, more than, or better than the previous. Then, yeah, I think, so I think, the, uh, ranking is also important as well.*

Daniel – interview 3

Overall, these students perceived that the status of attending an EMI university would increase their own status and employment prospects. They had developed a more complex view of EMI over their first year and saw that different stakeholders needed to gain from the status of EMI education. These students understood that English was tied to university rankings and that the rankings were important to the status of the university and used by employers. They were therefore happy to go along with the use of English as the medium of instruction to increase their own social, cultural and economic capital.

#### *6.7.3 Students continued to believe that investment in English would bring more opportunities and mobility*

It was clear from speaking with the students during the semester 2 mentoring sessions that they maintained the view that investment in English would bring opportunities and mobility. As reported in the Phase 2 findings, this was mainly about securing internships, exchange trips and graduate employment. In the quote from Kyle below, EMI status is linked with increased competitiveness.

*For the environment in Hong Kong, getting the degree from the English university is definitely more competitive.*

Kyle – Interview 3

Kyle's use of the word 'definitely' above signifies his strong belief that English would bring more prospects and hence, more mobility. This view was shared by other students. Kara, for example, felt that English was "*helping*" her to achieve her dream of being a fashion buyer. She imagined that she would have to travel and "*have communication*" with "*international colleagues*" (Interview 3). For Kara, there was no doubt that English would aid her career goals and make her more competitive. Though the reality of EMI disappointed in many respects, the status of EMI continued to be held as a strong belief, and it is this status of EMI that is perceived to bring mobility.

English was viewed by the focal students as a commodity which could be exchanged on the employment market. In interview 3, Kara suggested that English was a "*tool*" that "*improves*" your "*level or your value*". Kara felt that knowing more languages would increase her value and make her more competitive. Thus, her chances of upward mobility would be increased. This was a commonly held belief among these students.

**Andrew:** *Is it [English] something cultural? Like do you like watching, for example, movies in English, that kind of thing?*

**Kara:** *Yes. But right now, I think, um, it also like a tool, it also can, um, present that you have ... you know more than one language and then...*

**Andrew:** *Mm.*

**Kara:** *I think your level or your value may improve.*

Kara: Interview 3

In the quote above, Kara appears to prioritise the instrumental value of English over the cultural. Though some of the focal students enjoyed entertainment in English (e.g. TV series / gaming), from the mentoring sessions, it was clear that like Kara, they focused on the instrumental value of English to bring mobility.

In Phase 2, students reported that employers in Hong Kong expect graduates to come from English medium universities. The desires of employers were therefore on the minds of the students as they were aware that they needed to compete in the jobs market. The extract below is taken from a conversation with Kyle in which he comments that employers' views on EMI are more important than his own. When asked if he thought the university should teach in English, Kyle responded by saying

that the reflection of the industries is a more crucial factor. Kyle's comment is interesting because firstly it reflects the perception that employers are influencing the "*teacher model*", and secondly, it shows that the desires of employers contribute to the high status of English. If employers place importance on English then it becomes a more valuable commodity and thus the higher the value of the commodity, the higher the mobility of those who possess it. This in turn contributes to the appearance of English as a high-status language as an accepted norm. As mentioned in the literature review, an ideology is an idea perceived as natural and logical and therefore unquestioned. That English brings opportunity is an ideology that attracts little critical examination in the study context.

I think it more depends on the reflection of the industries. Say like maybe companies may think, "*Oh, if they're teaching students not by English, I would not hire the graduate from your faculty.*" So if it's the industry is feeling like this so then I think we should not have this kind of teacher model.

Kyle – Interview 3

In summary, English continued to be seen by these students as a clear route to upward mobility. The students viewed English as a high status language which was connected to the high value employers placed on English. By possessing English, they perceived that they could be more competitive in the graduate jobs market.

#### 6.7.4 Theme 5 summary

The year 1 journey affirmed and enhanced the students' belief in the promise of English. Despite struggling and feeling frustrated, English continued to be seen as highly important to their future success. The promise of English therefore propelled them forwards and if this belief had been shattered, the students may not have been so resilient in their studies. These students perceived English to have practical value and were motivated by the status English imbued on them. This status was seen as crucial for their mobility chances through graduate employment. These students held more sophisticated views towards English by the end of the academic year and were aware of the influence of different stakeholders on the status of English. Academic knowledge in English, ranking systems and the desires of employers were some of the factors which fuelled these students' commitment to English.

## 6.8 Connections between the themes

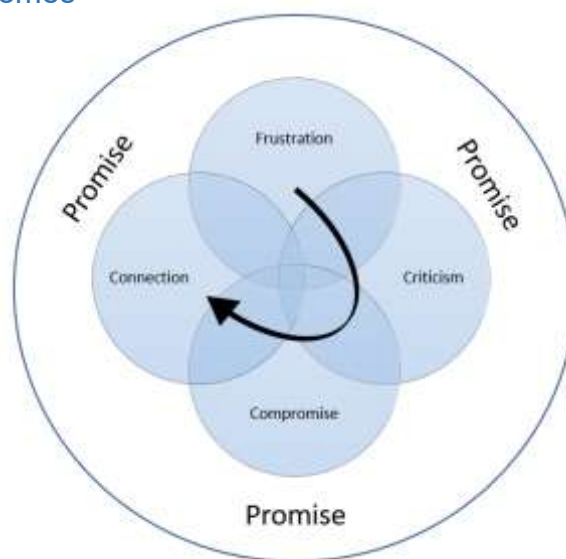


Figure 11: Connections between the Phase 3 themes

Like the Phase 2 results, the themes in Phase 3 represent two realities: the lived reality and the desired reality. The lived reality was the students' frustrations, critical feelings, compromises and their striving to connect with English. The desired reality was the expected future return that English would bring in terms of value, status and mobility. This desired reality powered the students' resilience to withstand and navigate the stormy journey with English.

The Phase 3 results have shown a journey in the students' experiences and emotions towards English. The arrow in Figure 11 represents this journey. Frustration and criticism led to the need for the students to make compromises and readjust their trajectories. Ironically, when they had reached these compromises, they were more able to take the pressure off themselves and this meant that they were more able to connect with English on their own terms. Though it would be an oversimplification to say that the journey represented in Figure 11 forms clear stages of a process towards connection, the connection they felt was an active process which grew out of their struggles, compromises and reflections.

By the end of year 1, the focal students were more able to view EMI from different perspectives as they became familiar with the learning environment. Viewing EMI through a multi-perspective lens enabled them to see that different stakeholders were struggling, too, for example, their lecturers. This gave the participants more confidence to see that any failings in the EMI experience were not solely their fault. The participants could also see more clearly that they were still able to take the rewards from EMI, such as the status, even if the experience did not match their expectations.

The students did not perceive great improvement in their language proficiency after their first year. The gains they had made were in their attitudes and thinking about English. Through the struggles

and tensions, they were developing a new understanding about English, and a new assessment about their relationship to this language which they placed great value on. Though clearly far from their goals, still struggling with deficit identities, and lowering their expectations and trajectories, they were at least more comfortable with English, and had more ownership. This is very different from the negative emotions they reported experiencing at school, such as hate and fear.

By the end of the first year, and in contrast to their earlier university experiences, these students were able to exercise more agency when crafting their English path. This means that they had more power (or room to manoeuvre) to define their positionality, trajectories and ownership over English. Though it could be argued that students merely reduced their expectations and trajectories after facing the harsh reality of EMI university, the connection to English reported in Theme 4 was forged by their own efforts and endeavours, and the new understanding they came to regarding English was an act of taking ownership over their English.

These students did not become disillusioned with English and their belief in the promise of English remained strong. The focal students did not criticise the dominance of English; their criticisms were placed on the university and lecturers for not upholding the principles of EMI education, and hence not increasing their capital. Despite the enormous effort and struggle, the students perceived English to be very relevant to their academic and professional lives and this propelled them forwards. This is a large change from their early schooling when they could not make a connection to English and only viewed it as a subject. Though the students had recalibrated their trajectories, they still perceived themselves as moving onwards and upwards. Their commitment to English therefore remained high.

## 6.9 Review of Phase 3 Themes

This table recaps the key themes and subthemes from the Phase 3 data collection.

Table 12: Phase 3: Summary of key themes

<b>Theme 1: Frustration</b>	<i>Illustrative quotes</i>
1.1 Frustration from the difficulty of using English in academic studies	<i>I am confused and feeling hard of just using the provided material in writing our own essay.</i>
1.2 Frustration from online learning	<i>I have experience the difficulties on all my teachers. And then, it costs me some time to fix the problem. So, I missed one lecture due to technology difficulties. I think it's very, uh, frustrating for me.</i>
1.3 Frustration from not enhancing English as much as expected	<i>They could speak English fluently and then not really, uh, have any grammar mistake, or they can, uh, very confidence to, uh, speak English. Compared with them, I ... we don't really have good English, yes.</i>
<b>Theme 2: Criticism</b>	<i>Illustrative quotes</i>
2.1 Students were critical of the lack of speaking opportunities	<i>Honestly, I don't think it's sufficient ... there is no opportunity for us to, uh, communicate with international students ...</i>
2.2 Students were critical of their lecturers' English levels	<i>I prefer him to say Mandarin [than] the English because the English is very, very bad and then some keywords I cannot hear and then he costs me for watching the video again.</i>
<b>Theme 3: Compromise</b>	<i>Illustrative quote</i>
3.1 Students compromised on their expectations for English development	<i>I don't think I can speak English fluently but at least my listening is improved...</i>
3.2 Students compromised on their expectations of the EMI experience	<i>He is forced to use English. So even though his grammar is wrong or some pronunciation is wrong. But he is still using English.</i>
<b>Theme 4: Connection</b>	<i>Illustrative quote</i>
4.1 Students connected to English by seeing it as a real-life skill	<i>I feel I'm connected to English 'cause, um, before attending to the university, I think, um, English is, it's just a requirement for me to fulfill, but um, ... after attend the university, I think, um, English is a skill for me to communicate with others.</i>



4.2 Students began to feel less afraid of English	<i>I can say not really big improve, but at least is willing to talk with them even my English is still like that, but I just can overcome it and then try to present my idea.</i>
4.3 Students connected with English through non-university experiences	<i>Right now I'm working in the restaurant and then I also, uh, contact with a lot of foreign customers. So which make me feel English is close to me anyway.</i>
<b>Theme 5: Promise</b>	<i>Illustrative quotes</i>
5.1 Students continued to believe in the instrumental value of English	<i>... there's many useful things, yeah, many useful things will happen if you use English.</i>
5.2 Students continued to see English as increasing their status	<i>English seems more high class.</i>
5.3 Students continued to believe that English would bring mobility	<i>For the environment of Hong Kong, getting the degree from the English university is definitely more competitive.</i>

## CHAPTER 7 *Discussion and conclusion*

### 7.1 Chapter overview

In this chapter, I will firstly review the research problem and research focus, and then restate and answer the research questions. After, I will present and discuss the main findings. I will then go on to discuss the pedagogical implications and recommendations before finally discussing the limitations and future directions of the research.

### 7.2 Summary of the research

In this section, I review the research focus and summarise the main findings.

#### 7.2.1 *Review of research problem*

In a bid to remain competitive and relevant, universities in non-Anglophone contexts are increasingly providing more provision through the medium of English. In this growing educational context, English has become essential for students' academic progression, and is promoted as a key ingredient for employability and future success. As well as the top-down implementation of EMI, it is also a bottom-up process (Rose, 2021) with increasing student demand for EMI programmes. Research into the growing phenomenon of EMI education has generally highlighted that EMI implementation is not straightforward and students often struggle in these learning contexts (e.g. Evans and Morrison, 2011a; 2011b; Kamaşak, Sahan and Rose, 2021). As pointed out by researchers (e.g. Macaro, et al., 2018; Rose, et al., 2020a) one of the main tensions for many students is that their proficiency levels may not enable them to access the coveted rewards that English medium instruction promises. This is especially the case for lower proficiency students who may become marginalised by EMI. There is a need to understand the experiences of lower proficiency students to inform EMI implementation and ensure an equitable learning environment.

#### 7.2.2 *Review of the study focus*

This focal study provides an in-depth account of the English language journeys of lower proficiency students across their first year at an English medium university. The study gives voice to learners who view themselves as low English achievers so that they can share their concerns and endeavours with English. English has been viewed in this study not only as a linguistic system but also a form of “social practice in which identities and desires are

negotiated in the context of complex and often unequal social relationships” (Norton, 2016, p.81). The study therefore seeks to not only understand the language challenges faced by the focal students, but also their relationships with English. The study aims to develop a deep understanding of the discursive positionings, desires and language ideologies of the participants over year 1, and how the tensions they experienced influenced their investment and trajectories with English. In this study, positioning refers to how the participants perceive themselves in relation to English and the empowerment or disempowerment that results; desire refers to how the learners see English as integrated into their future self-visions and the impact this has on their language learning investment; language ideologies refer to the systems of ideas that the participants align with and that shape their language learning practices.

### *7.2.3 Research questions*

*The present study sought to answer the following questions:*

1. What are the discursive positionings, desires and language ideologies of students with lower English proficiency levels during their first year at an English medium instruction (EMI) university in Hong Kong?
2. How do these positionings, desires and language ideologies change over the first year of study?
3. What tensions do students experience with English during their first year? And how do these tensions affect their investment in English and their learning trajectories?

### *7.2.4 Summary of main findings*

The overarching finding is that the students held complex relationships with English influenced by their positioning, desires and language ideologies. The first year English journey was a site of hope and struggle, and the findings firmly reflect poststructuralist interpretations of identity as “the struggle of habitus and desire, of competing ideologies and imagined identities” (Darvin and Norton, 2015, p.45). Overall, the findings show that the focal students struggled with English throughout the academic year. This was both a linguistic and affective struggle as the students strived to survive and assert themselves in the new academic environment. As with the findings of Evans and Morrison (2011b) students did have positive experiences and enjoyed the challenge of the new learning environment. Despite the challenges, by the end of

the year, they did manage to become more comfortable with English. The following section answers the research questions.

#### *7.2.4.1 RQ1: Participants' positionings*

A striking finding was the impact of the students' past experiences on their positioning at the beginning of university. The students had minimal opportunities to connect with English from an early age and they felt disadvantaged by their parents' lack of English capital. The lack of interactional opportunities at school had further distanced them from English and this was exacerbated by high-stakes school exams. These experiences had resulted in the students positioning themselves as low English achievers, and they held strong negative emotions towards English which perpetuated a deficit identity.

#### *7.2.4.2 RQ1: Participants' desires for English*

The focal students recognised that English was essential to their success at university and beyond. This resulted in a strong desire to enhance their English to enable access and participation within the university and future professional circles. Participants reported wanting to be *fluent*, *competent* and *confident* in English and saw themselves working in professional roles which would require interaction with foreigners. The participants were striving for new possibilities of the self of which English was an important component. Desire for English was circulated between peers, the university and employers, and this reinforced English competence as a desired trait. This reinforcement of English competence as a desirable and essential ingredient of the ideal graduate gave the students pressure. The results support the notion that desire is constructed dialectically between the "macro-domains of public discourses and the micro-domains of individual experience" (Piller and Takahashi, 2006, p.59).

#### *7.2.4.3 RQ1: Participants' language ideologies*

In terms of the students' language ideologies, the predominant belief was that better English equalled more opportunities. English was seen as an enabler to increase the status and market worth of individuals. The participants' beliefs closely aligned with neoliberal notions that see English as a commodity with high value, and those who possess this commodity could exchange its value to secure more status and opportunities. The students did not report wanting affiliation with national varieties of English or national cultures, except Kara who was

pursuing a UK accent. The students thus saw English in instrumental terms as part of a toolkit which could help them realise their desired selves. It was clear that the focal students were working within this ideology and did not see it possible to challenge the dominance of English. The participants had little manoeuvre to resist the entrepreneurial perspective of language learning (De Costa, Park and Wee, 2016) in the EMI setting.

#### *7.2.4.4 RQ2: Changes in positionings*

Though students continued to feel insecure with English, they paid great effort to reposition themselves within the learning community and overcome the many challenges. As the students progressed through the year, they dealt with challenges such as *lengthy English assignments, a lack of interactional opportunities, online learning, and low-proficiency lecturers*. The students' varying interpretations of these types of experiences shaped their journeys with English causing positive and negative realignments. Eventually, the participants compromised on their EMI university expectations and reduced their proficiency goals. However, through this process, the participants commonly felt more relaxed about English which led to more connection with the language. Though it can be concluded that most of the students felt more connected to English and exercised more agency over their English by the end of the year, it would be an overstatement to suggest that they had redressed any power balances that disadvantaged them in any significant way. The students thus, overall, continued to regard themselves as low achievers with English and ultimately downgraded their expectations for proficiency gains.

#### *7.2.4.5 RQ2: Changes in desires*

The participants continued to hold strong desires for English throughout their first year, especially as they witnessed English being used in more situations than school exams. Key factors contributing to the students' ongoing desire for English included wanting to be more like higher-proficiency peers, needing good English grades to access exchange and internship opportunities, and wanting to express themselves in a sophisticated manner in their assignments and presentations. Overall, the participants saw that English was useful, high-status and a skill that could bring mobility. Their strong future self-visions maintained their desire for English.

#### 7.2.4.6 RQ2: *Changes in language ideologies*

The participants held conflicting views towards English and overall, their attitudes towards English became more complex as the year progressed. Participants found English to be a valuable investment and viewed it as important for accessing opportunities and enhancing their competitiveness. Other reasons for the students' high valuation of English, include their trust in English sources and their perceived lack of Chinese literacy which put them off wanting to study in Chinese. A contrasting view to this commitment to English was that many of the students grew to believe that English was not an ideal language of instruction. However, this was more to do with the university's implementation of EMI which did not meet their expectations. A common view was that the university should continue to teach in English because of its perceived use and access to opportunities. Significantly, across the year, students relied on the status gains that EMI would bring and came to exploit the benefits of EMI more strategically. Another change was that the students began to see the issue of EMI from different perspectives, and this brought more compromise and acceptance of the less than perfect EMI experience. Overall, the participants were committed to EMI but also became more critical, strategic and multi-perspective in their thinking.

#### 7.2.4.7 RQ3: *Tensions and effects on investment and trajectories*

##### *Overcoming deficit identities*

The major tension was between the students' positionality, and their desires and language ideologies. The common positionality was that of low achiever in English but the students had strong desire for English and aligned themselves with the belief that English could enhance their prospects. This tension was therefore between their *perceived selves*, their *desired selves* and their *opportunistic selves*. Across the year, the students attempted to reduce the gap between their perceived selves and their desired selves by investing in English. This journey, however, was fraught with various empowering and disempowering experiences, and ultimately, the students needed to make compromises in their continual realignments. By the end of the year, deficit identities remained but the participants had begun to feel more relaxed about English.

##### *Language struggle*

Another major tension was between the students' desire for English and their language struggles at university. It was difficult for the students to close the gap between their current proficiency levels and their desired selves as fluent and sophisticated English users. *Technical*

*vocabulary, lengthy assignments, and difficulty in expressing themselves in the academic register* all caused problems for the students. At the same time, the students were critical of the quality of lecturing in English, the inaccessibility of informal exchanges with international students, and the shift to online learning. English thus became a scarce commodity under these conditions with the mentoring sessions being one of the only outlets the students could practice English informally. Overall, the students were disappointed with the lack of opportunities to enhance English proficiency and confidence, and felt that this hampered their opportunities to succeed. Progress towards their desired selves was therefore slow and this circulated more tension within the students.

### *Competition*

A further tension for the students was the pressure they felt from perceiving themselves to be behind their peers. The students quickly compared themselves to peers and understood themselves to be in a competition-based system where they need to be entrepreneurial about enhancing their skills. English proficiency was one of the main desired competencies students valued to make themselves more competitive. Thus, feeling behind other students and needing to spend extra effort on English placed a great burden on the focal students. A major part of this tension is about competition versus participation. Students felt forced to catch up and compete with peers which did not frame the educational experience in terms of participation for enrichment.

### *Disappointment of the EMI experience*

The students were trying to redefine their relationships with English and appease past disadvantages that caused insecurity with English. University was seen as a fresh chance to develop their English in new ways but one tension was between the promise and the reality of this new university experience. Students were very hopeful to fulfil the image of becoming articulate and confident graduates, but disappointment set in as the EMI experience and their struggle with English hindered their progress. Over year 1, the students did manage to realign themselves closer to English, but it can be concluded that the study experience had yet to fulfil the promise and justification of EMI.

### *Competitiveness versus learning*

A final major tension was between the value of English in preparing students for a globalised world, and the value of English as an instructional language to enhance discipline knowledge. Overall, the students felt that English should remain the instructional language, but many began to see some advantages in studying in Cantonese, especially for content knowledge gains. The students' views on the value of EMI therefore grew more conflicting over the year

and were infused with university, employer and societal expectations. EMI was considered by the students as not only a status marker for themselves, but also for the university; and higher university rankings and reputation would in turn embellish the value of graduates. The major tension was thus between the commodity value of English for economic and status exchange, against its value as an instructional language to advance discipline expertise.

### 7.3 Discussion of important findings

In the last section, I summarised the findings in relation to the research questions. In this section, I will highlight and discuss the most important findings of this study in reference to existing theories and studies. Though the three areas of positionality, desire and ideology will be addressed separately, I discuss how they influence each other within each section. In each section, I also discuss the tensions that students experienced and their investment in English.

#### 7.3.1 Students' positionality with English

In this section, I will discuss two significant findings regarding students' positionality with English.

##### 7.3.1.1 Deficit identities

This part focusses on how the students' backgrounds influenced their positionality with English.

***Finding 1: The students held deficit identities influenced by their background and comparisons with peers; this added pressure to the start of their English journey at university***

This study has shown how the backgrounds and schooling of the participants influenced their relationship with English. The Phase 1 results revealed that these students had minimal authentic experiences with English in early life, especially their parents' lack of proficiency with English and inability to provide any home opportunities with English. Early learning experiences with English in pre-school were mostly missing and the participants viewed this as a disadvantage in being able to connect with English from an early age. The lack of contact with English was compounded by a schooling system which emphasised testing and teacher-fronted pedagogies. This resulted in the students feeling a lack of connection with English and a welling of negative emotions and insecurities about their language proficiency and feelings



towards English. Upon entering university, the students held deficit English identities and positioned themselves as low achievers compared to peers. This positioning added pressure during the first semester as they rated themselves against peers. They perceived that these peers were in a more advantageous position due to their higher proficiency levels with English and the lack of time and energy they needed to dedicate to English.

The results echo other studies which show how contextual factors can lead to low self-esteem and a low self-positioning with English, as well as self-marginalisation (Sung, 2020). In a similar way to my students, Yung's (2020, p.877) in-depth study of an English learner in Hong Kong showed how a lack of early life experiences with English, and minimal family resources, left the participant feeling "disadvantaged" and "worse off than other pupils". Like my students, Yung's participant was highly invested in English despite holding negative self-perceptions about her English. Both this focal study and Yung's study show the struggle that students go through to gain access to English.

One major influencing factor on my participants was the label 'DSE3' which positioned them as lower proficiency students. This caused pressure and a lack of confidence. Studies in other settings have shown how similar labels can affect students negatively (e.g. Marshall, 2009; Rawal and De Costa, 2019). In the American context, Rawal and De Costa (2019) described how immigrant students struggled to assert themselves as they went through the college application process. Rawal and De Costa's participants displayed a range of emotions and negative self-perceptions, feeling held back by their backgrounds. The participants also felt disappointed at their parents' lack of cultural and economic capital to help them in the education system and held a negative stance towards their prescribed English Language Learner (ELL) identity. These students experienced a feeling of inferiority with English which the authors placed as stemming from relational and contextual factors. Similar to the ELL status, within my participants, a strong contributor to the feeling of inferiority was their status as 'DSE3' students and their placement in a proficiency rather than academic English subject in semester 1. The studies mentioned above support what was found in my study; namely that the participants' backgrounds and past learning experiences undesirably influenced their positioning and self-perceptions at a critical transition in their studies.

The findings above show the salient timescales (Lemke, 2000) that influenced the focal students at a critical time in their study path. At the start of university, these interacting timescales, most notably the lack of access to English at home, the learning style implemented in schools and the high-stakes exam culture, all influenced the participants' self-positioning with English. At the start of their university careers, the students compared themselves against peers and rated themselves as lower English achievers. These contextual factors along with

the smaller day to day experiences and their ongoing reflective evaluations combined to shape the positionality of the focal students. This view of the learners reflects and demonstrates Ushioda's (2009) call to balance the cognitive lens of language learning with a relational and contextual lens. The results above reveal how the learners, within their embedded contexts, positioned themselves as low English achievers.

This study tracks English learners who have entered a new educational context. According to Darwin and Norton (2015, p.44), when a person attempts to participate in a new context, the "volume, composition, and trajectory" of their capital is re-evaluated. In the EMI university context, this means that the students' language skills are awarded a value. The process of valuation that my learners experienced was similar to what Marshall (2009, p.43) describes as "deligitimization"; a positioning by the university that they have a problem. The problem in this case was that the English ability of the participants was not sufficient enough to be placed in an academic English course in semester 1. Despite being admitted into the university, my participants needed to take a proficiency course before they could take an academic English subject and consider themselves as "legitimate" university students (Marshall, 2009, p.54). This status compounded their identity as 'DSE3' students and their own comparisons with peers which led them to devalue their own skills and achievements. Though these learners had overcome disadvantages to secure a place at university, a positive achievement, they had been positioned, and positioned themselves, on the periphery of the academic community. This positioning may have affected their sense of belonging in the university; and sense of belonging has been shown to be an important aspect of success and retention at university (Naylor, Baik and Arkoudis, 2018).

Figure 12 below summarises the overall positioning the focal students held at the start of university, and the main common influencing factors on their positioning. Overall, the students positioned themselves as low achievers and lacking in English skills. They felt behind other students and needing to catch up. They also felt lucky to have made it into university, suggesting that they did not feel like legitimate students. At the start of university, the students were heavily influenced by their past experiences, as shown on the left side of Figure 12. Their positioning was also influenced by their new university experiences as shown on the right side of Figure 12. These new experiences compounded the students' insecurity with English.

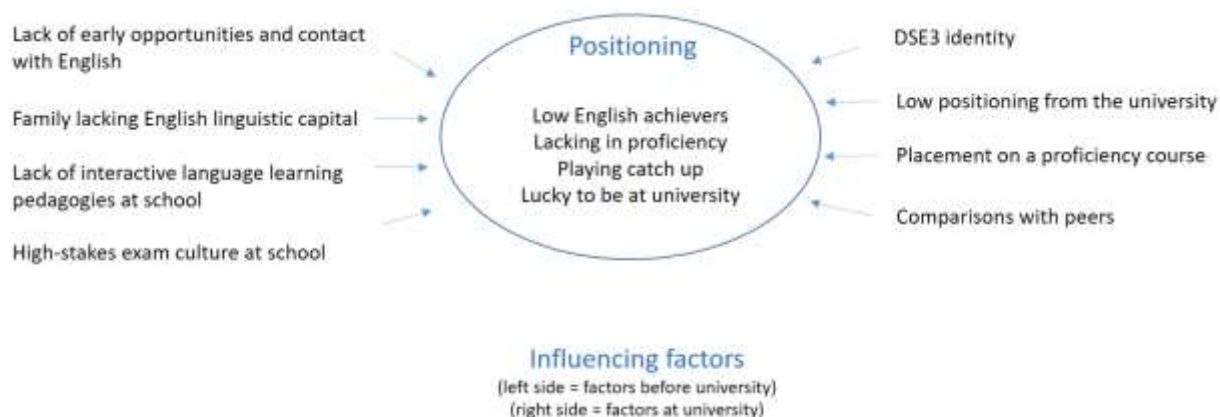


Figure 12: Students' positioning at the start of university

### 7.3.1.2 Students' repositioning

The last part assessed the participants' positionality at the start of university. The focus now is on how the participants attempted to reposition themselves as they journeyed across the first year at university.

**Finding 2:** *The students continued to position themselves as low-proficiency English learners, however, they managed to overcome some of their insecurities with English and felt closer to English by the end of the academic year*

The focal students struggled to assert themselves in class due to their lack of confidence with English and perceived lower proficiency levels. Most of the participants did not speak up in class and remained silent. One strong emotion experienced by many of the participants was shame (see Liyanage and Canagarajah, 2019) at not being more proficient after studying English for so many years. Comparing themselves to peers, the focal students felt inferior, perceiving that they were less fluent and proficient in English. One of the greatest barriers for the students was their frustration at not being able to express their ideas in English. This was especially related to a lack of vocabulary and not yet being accustomed with the conventions of academic communication; common problems reported in the literature (e.g. Evans and Morrison, 2011a; 2011b; Kamaşak, Sahan and Rose, 2021). At the start of their university careers, the participants accepted their position as 'DSE3' students in the university. In fact, all agreed in the Phase 1 data collection that they should take a proficiency English subject in semester 1 due to their English DSE result. It was only later that they found that they had been

disadvantaged by not taking an academic English subject. At the same time as accepting this lower proficiency identity, the students were attempting to develop an academic identity to stake their legitimacy in the new academic community. This meant contending with their proficiency levels and deficit identities and is similar to Sung's (2020) participants who tried to align their capital to the university community. This finding reflects the notion that identity is "changing, and a site of struggle" (Darvin and Norton, 2015; Norton Peirce, 1995).

As the academic year progressed, the learners gained more agentive power and managed to overcome some of their insecurities with English. A few notable critical incidents and realisations aided this shift in positioning. Some of the students, for example, found that their lecturers' proficiency in English was similar or lower than their own which took some pressure off them. They realised that breakdowns in the EMI experience were not solely their fault and this helped them to reposition their presence in the university from being a 'problem'. As they became more critical of the EMI experience, they realised that the lecturers' proficiency levels and English teaching ability were also problems. In Bourdieu's (1977) terms, in the 'language market exchange' of the class, having similar proficiency levels to their lecturers meant that the students' English held a higher value than in other classes (e.g. their English classes) where the teachers' English levels were deemed to have much higher value. In classes where students held similar proficiency levels to their teachers, the distribution of language power was more equal. In other critical incidents, some participants found part-time jobs which offered new English identities, and some took confidence in seeing English being used imperfectly but effectively in professional settings. This helped some of the participants take more risks with English and be less self-conscious in their English identities. A critical realisation for Zoe was that studying with international students did not reap many rewards. Zoe directed her effort on to her academic identity rather than pursuing exchanges with international students, which she concluded were not efficient or helpful for achieving a higher GPA. These and other experiences helped the focal learners to redefine their relationship with English from one of recipient to strategic user. Though all of the students reported minimal proficiency gains and still held deficit identities by the end of the year, to differing levels they had all staked more ownership over English, held more legitimate university student identities, and had more connection to English. These findings concur with Huff-Sisson's (2016) assertion that critical incidents can play a strong role in initiating acts of agency. They also concur with Norton and Toohey's (2011, p.414) argument that while some identity positions may constrain learners, other identity positions can "offer enhanced sets of possibilities". My participants were becoming strategic users of subject positioning by diversifying their identity positions. This was an attempt to redefine their prescribed identity as lower proficiency students and hence rebalance the power ascribed to them through this deficit identity.

The results discussed above echo findings in other studies. Like my students, Sung's (2019) university student participant felt silenced in class, sought alternative English experiences, and took on alternative English identities across different settings. Sung's student disinvested in his academic identity and instead pursued alternative identity projects including a professional identity through his part-time job. As the year progressed, my participants diversified their English identities across different contexts. Unlike my students, Sung's student did not invest in his academic identity which may be because he was in his final years of university and my participants were at the beginning of their academic journeys. My participants had much to gain from investing in academic English because it was related to GPA, and GPA was related to internship and exchange opportunities.

Willingness and openness to become a member of the academic community was probably a key reason for my participants' continued investment in their academic identities. Teng (2019) also reported that this willingness was a key ingredient to gaining power and ownership over English. One of his university student participants managed to persevere with her English journey and navigate her English identity to develop a positive stance and trajectory with English. Her continued willingness to engage in the academic community and seek out learning opportunities were reasons for her success. It is difficult, however, for some students to maintain this willingness to participate and another of Teng's participants, despite high hopes for university, lost interest in English. This sent him on a downward trajectory which ended in him becoming more isolated from the academic community. His low proficiency and lack of agentive power could not keep him afloat in the academic environment. My participants did manage to stay afloat (except perhaps for Marco who left the university) across year 1 and continued to invest in their academic identities as well as diversifying their English identities across different contexts. It could be argued that this was a process of empowerment and disempowerment within the flux of their various identities. For example, receiving a good grade in her English class was empowering for Zoe and notched her learning trajectory and positive English identity up a key. The opposite could be said for Kyle who was disappointed with his grades, prodding him away from English and reducing his desire for an academic English identity. Similarly, Daniel had a successful interaction with an exchange student, thus edging him closer to English while Kyle found that there was a line between him and the exchange students, edging him away from pursuing this dimension of identity. It is these interacting experiences and critical incidents which send the learner's identity in varying directions. Overall, my students edged closer to English.

The poststructuralist perspective sees identity as a malleable set of subject positionings shaped over time by struggle, experience, desires and power relations (Darvin and Norton, 2015; Norton and Toohey, 2011). The first year experience of my participants reflects what

Norton and Toohey (2011, p.418) describe as the “paradox of positioning”. This is the tension between the constraints (e.g. background or prescribed identities) and the struggle for agency. My participants’ initial goal was to become validated members of their new academic community and English was an important element of this. Through their diversifying and strategic use of subject positioning, they managed to claim some ownership and power over English, resulting in a closer connection to the language. This was an ongoing struggle however, and was far from over by the end of their first year. Overall, the results support the notion that "desire in language is the personal disturbance and realignment experienced by the language user, whose identity is constitutive of and constituted by the foreign symbolic system itself." (Kramsch, 2006, p.102).

Figure 13 shows how these personal disturbances or critical incidents over year 1 had empowering or disempowering effects (realignment). These empowering and disempowering experiences consciously or unconsciously forced the students to reposition themselves with English either to a higher positioning or a lowering positioning. On the left side is a downward positioning causing less power and agency, and a lowering of trajectories with English. On the right side is an upward positioning resulting in more power and agency, and a raising of trajectories. The types of empowering and disempowering experiences the participants had include peer comparisons, their positioning as lower proficiency students by the university, grades, lecturer proficiency levels, and interactions in English. Figure 13 shows that as the students journeyed across their first year, their positioning with English was in constant flux, and was a site of struggle and negotiation.



Figure 13: Repositioning of students’ relationship, identity, and trajectory with English

### 7.3.2 Student desire for English

In this section, I will discuss the participants' desire for English and how this desire influenced their investment and trajectories with English.

#### 7.3.2.1 Strong future visions

This part discusses how the participants' desire for English was fuelled by their strong future self-visions.

***Finding 3:*** *The students held specific visions of future selves as global professionals which remained intact over the year and fuelled continual investment in English*

Desire can be defined as the drive to reach an idealised self (Kramsch, 2006) and English was a major aspect of this drive. The participants' desire for English grew stronger throughout the academic year and was fuelled by seeing the importance of English at university and in accessing the professions. At university, English had a direct influence on the participants' grades and this affected their chances to secure internships and exchange trips. As well as this practical need for English, the participants desired English as part of an academic identity in which they could express ideas articulately using the conventions of academic discourse. English was seen by the participants as a trademark of quality education and this also fuelled their desire for English which could add to their status as good quality graduates. The students also felt that English would give them access to new communities, especially professional communities. Most envisioned that they would use English in international interactions and desired to have confident command of English. Desire for English was therefore a desire for an improved self (Kramsch, 2006), and a desire to access new communities (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This new self would gain status and opportunities from having sophisticated and confident use of English and be able to handle English in different settings and situations. It was clear that there were many influences over the students' desires including peers, the university, and especially employers. For some of the participants, the political tensions had influenced them to set their sights on moving away from Hong Kong. English was intertwined into their future self-visions and therefore desire for English was strong and did not dissipate over year 1.

Learner desire for English has been documented in other empirical studies. Liu's (2019) Thai students, for example, were in pursuit of English to work in international companies; their

desire for English was based around using English to gain credentials and cultural capital to market themselves. This aligns with my participants who wanted to increase their English linguistic capital to access opportunities and make themselves competitive. My participants felt pressure to 'keep up' with other students whom they viewed as competitors for opportunities within the university and in the graduate job market. This notion of pressure is echoed in Sah and Karki's (2020) lower income school-age participants who felt pressure to attend EMI schools to remain competitive. This suggests that desire and pressure are intertwined and fuel each other. Sung's (2019) university student participant desired to belong to new professional communities and identify himself as an international traveller. These desires fuelled his selective investments in English. Likewise, my participants imagined themselves belonging to new communities, for example, Kara held strong visions of being a fashion buyer in Italy and Daniel saw himself working as a civil engineer and collaborating on international projects. Desire for English was therefore not only about access to better opportunities (e.g. through employability) but participation in new communities and an increased identity repertoire.

The above findings support theoretical orientations in the field of applied linguistics. The findings uphold Kramsch's (2006) view of desire as a "basic drive towards self-fulfilment" and new possibilities of the self. My participants held vivid self-visions (You and Dörnyei, 2016) which supports Pavlenko's (2013) reflection that university students in particular have a strong sense of drive and direction. The participants were also aiming to engage with a new social reality (Kramsch, 2006) and belong to new communities (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

The findings also support the view that desire is co-constructed and a site of struggle (Motha and Lin, 2014). My participants, for example, were in support but also found pressure in the visions the university had for them. In the last section it was seen that the students were positioned as low proficiency and not fully legitimate members; they felt pressure to be part of the university's vision for their graduates to be able and confident English users and compete with graduates from other universities. The students struggled with the tension between their past disadvantages and their desires for who they wanted to become. Henry (2014) noted how visions of possible selves are embedded into processes that occur on different timescales. Within my participants, their visions of their desired selves were infused into larger timescales influencing the time and space they occupied. For example, their past schooling experiences and background may have constrained the limit of their desires, while at the same time expanding their desire for new social realities and possibilities. The timescale of globalisation offers new possibilities, fuelling desires for mobility, and in the local context, the political tensions may have fuelled desire for mobility from a different perspective. These examples support the notion that desire is a complex, co-constructed, a conflicting site of struggle, and



embedded into different timescales. Despite the participants' strong desire for English, their progress towards their idealised selves was held back by language difficulties. This will be the focus of the next part.

### 7.3.2.2 Language struggle

This part discusses the tensions the participants experienced and the compromises they made as they struggled to cope with English and work towards their desired selves.

***Finding 4:*** *The students struggled with English throughout the year which led to pressure, disappointment, frustration, and eventually compromise and a downgrading of proficiency trajectories*

Despite strong desire for the rewards of English, the participants struggled to make proficiency gains across year 1 and did not report high confidence increases with their English. The high expectations for their English articulated at the start of the academic year had been lowered by the final interviews. Though all the students found that they used English in their studies, they blamed the lack of opportunities to engage in authentic conversation and also cited the shift to online learning as further hampering their chances to engage with English. The focal students experienced much frustration and pressure due to using English in their studies. The participants eventually compromised on their expectations and lowered their perceived trajectories with English as they faced difficulties in their studies and could not access enough opportunities to resolve this. The disparity between their strengthening desire for English and the lowering of proficiency goals increased over year 1.

The language challenges faced by my participants echo many other studies (most notably, Aizawa and Rose, 2020; Evans and Morrison, 2011a; 2011b; Kamaşak, Sahan and Rose, 2021). These studies identified key challenges for students in EMI university settings which include using appropriate academic style, using vocabulary, and reading and writing academic texts. These were all common difficulties faced by my students. In terms of the relationship between desire and proficiency improvement, Al-Hoorie (2018) suggests that self-visions can impact effort but have less impact on proficiency. This backs my findings that the students held strong desires for an English enhanced identity which led them to invest in English across year 1, but resulted in no major perceived proficiency gains.

The desire for English and the identity possibilities that English promises was in tension with the participants' lived experiences. This tension caused much strain and emotion for the participants. Across the year, English increasingly became a commodity which they could not

acquire and which caused deep-seated emotions. They perceived that peers were more fluent in English and were in a better position to access the opportunities that English could grant them. Observing peers and seeing themselves within a competition based-system, the desire for English within the students grew. This fuelled further investment in English, but the scarcity of opportunities caused further frustration and deep proficiency gains were not achieved. Within the field of affect and emotions in SLA, the results of my study reflect Imai's (2010) finding that emotions mediate action and negative emotions can have differing effects on learners. Leo for example, worked through his disappointment to reach a relaxed and positive perspective on his English journey. By the end of year 1 he held an open disposition towards English. Daniel on the other hand had lowered his perceived trajectory with English to reduce further disappointment. By lowering his trajectory he felt that he could protect himself, but had potentially closed doors to language enhancement.

The issues discussed above raise a point about the crossover between desire, fantasy and even "delusion" (Sah and Karki, 2020, p.1). If desires for English become too unattainable then they become more fantasy-like. This reflects the perspective of Piller, Takahashi and Watanabe (2010) that English can be an illusion for many learners who never manage to reach their transformative goals. This raises a concern about whether language desires empower or disempower learners. A popular narrative is that investment in English enables social and economic mobility and plays an "emancipatory" role in helping disadvantaged groups access the opportunities globalisation may afford (Park, 2011, p.443). Studies, however, show that the pursuit of English is often unsuccessful for certain groups and reinforces existing inequalities. Sah and Karki (2020), for example, found that students from lower income families shifting to EMI education struggled to study effectively and the promises of English were not realised. This was mainly because of a lack of proficiency and resources of the students and teachers in schools based in lower income areas. The first year journey for my participants was one of simultaneous empowerment and disempowerment. Desire for English, fuelled by university and employer expectations enabled clear future self-visions which spurred them to invest in English. At the same time, their positioning by the university and struggle to express themselves in the EMI environment disempowered them. This was the push and pull of the tensions between their desires and the lived reality.

The results discussed above show how desires can drive EMI students to invest in English despite the struggle to make proficiency gains. The results have shown that the participants held specific future self-visions embedded in academic, professional and online communities. These desires were co-constructed and infused into dominant ideologies. The results highlight that language learning desires can simultaneously empower and disempower learners and cause a range of emotions which mediate action and trajectories. Language learning desires

were infused into the identity projects and ideologies of the students which formed a site of struggle and becoming within the students.

To further sum up, Figure 14 shows the tension between the reality of English for the participants, and their common desires related to English. As mentioned above, this tension grew in severity over the year as they struggled to acquire the English language skills to reach their desired identities. The left side shows the expectations on students to enhance their English. The participants felt some pressure to live up to these expectations, and these expectations contributed to informing their desires. As Motha and Lin (2014) suggest, desires are co-constructed by various stakeholders. The right side shows some common ways in which the students invested their time and effort into English. This investment was fuelled by their desires of possible selves and the expectations of the different stakeholders. Overall, the participants' investment remained strong over the year despite their struggle with English. Figure 14 is a flexible interpretation of how the participants experienced tension between the reality of their studies, and their desired futures selves, and how desires and expectations influenced their investment in English.



Figure 14: The tension between the study reality and the common desires of students

### 7.3.3 Students' language ideologies

This final section of important findings focusses on the participants' language ideologies and their changing views towards EMI.

#### 7.3.3.1 The value of English

The following part discusses the participants' valuation and commitment to English and assesses this with a neoliberal lens.

**Finding 5:** *The students strongly believed that English would enhance their prospects. They remained committed to English across year 1 despite struggling with the language.*

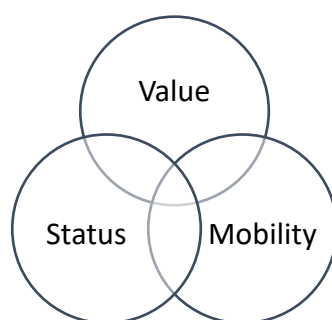


Figure 15: Students' perceptions of the promise of English

The participants held strong beliefs that English would aid self-improvement and bring future rewards. This is very similar to other studies (e.g. Doiz and Lasagabaster, 2018; Liu, 2019). My participants described English as a 'ticket', an 'enabler', an 'identifier' to 'show off yourself', something that could 'improve your value', and make you more 'competitive'. Overall, three overarching beliefs regarding the promise of English emerged from this research as shown in Figure 15. Students felt that English was practical and useful; they thought that better command of English would increase their status; and they consistently reported that English would enhance their opportunities and prospects, which relates to mobility. Belief in the promise of English was reinforced by peers, the university, perceived expectations from employers, and Hong Kong society. The students therefore felt pressure to enhance their English seeing it as a 'basic skill', an 'expectation', and a skill that they would be judged on and compared to with others. At the same time as holding this belief in the promise of English to increase their educational and professional opportunities, the students struggled to make gains in their English skills. Ultimately, the participants viewed that they did not possess

enough linguistic capital to compete with peers but strongly desired to reap the perceived benefits of English. This caused tension within the students. In an attempt to close the gap between the promise of English and their perceived deficiencies with English, the participants continued to invest in English across year 1. One demonstration of this investment is the high attendance rate at the mentoring sessions.

The beliefs that the participants held regarding the promise of English can be interpreted through a neoliberal lens. As Chun (2016, p.560) suggests, English is a “branded global commodity” and sold to students as a transferrable skill which can help “remake” the individual. This forms the discourse of English as capital accumulation and contributes to the wider ideology that individuals must continually upgrade themselves to remain competitive (Flores, 2013; Park, 2011). My students accepted the idea that investment in English would increase their opportunities, but at the same time felt pressure to invest in English. As one student relayed: “you have to keep making improvement, otherwise you will be ousted”. This student felt pressure to enhance his skillset in accordance with the demands of the market and reflects Darwin and Norton’s (2016) assertion that commitment to ideologies is both voluntary and coercive. One of the tensions for the students was therefore between their willingness to conform to the notion of the ideal student (as neoliberal subject) and the pressure to avoid being left behind because of a lack of English capital.

Doiz and Lasagabaster (2018, p.669) found in their study of EMI students at a Spanish university that investment in English did not “appear to take an important toll” on the students (though their students did need to spend extra time and effort on English). This is different to my students who experienced much pressure and frustration in achieving the English dream. Doiz and Lasagabaster’s students appeared to be at a higher proficiency level (B2) than my participants (borderline B1-B2) and opted to take subjects in English which probably contributed to their smoother EMI experience. These contrasting findings suggest that proficiency plays a part in the EMI experience as well as freedom to choose the language of instruction.

One of the dangers for EMI universities is that the pressure to make gains in English becomes too much and the promise of English cannot be reached. This may cause students to disinvest in English. As mentioned earlier, one of Teng’s (2019) participants disinvested in English because his lack of proficiency led him to hold a peripheral position in the learning community. This student held high hopes for enhancing his English capital at the start of university, but eventually gave up on English. This led him to pursue the idea of becoming self-employed rather than applying for graduate positions which demanded English communication skills. In contrast, my participants maintained their commitment to English over year 1, but the gap

between their idealised view of English for material returns and the reality of struggling with English was high. This gap could potentially lead to a breakdown of motivation and investment in English later on in their university careers.

Though the promise of English continued to feed my participants' commitment to English, one student (Kyle) did become disenchanted with his EAP classes (e.g. receiving low grades) and began focusing more on professional English. This suggests that he was disinvesting from the pursuit of an academic English identity and was searching for alternative identity options. This is very similar to what happened to Sung's (2019) university student who pursued professional English identities after finding difficulty integrating into the academic community. Sung's student and Kyle had not given up on English but were pursuing alternative English identity options. They were still committed to the pursuit of English for capital accumulation to make themselves "marketable commodities" (Chun, 2009, p.112). These students had struggled to exchange their language skills into capital valued within the academic community, and this had subsequently reduced one way to validate their position within this community. The students therefore sought to validate their linguistic capital in alternative ways. Making these alternative and selective investments could be seen to be an act of resistance and a way to seek more agency. It shows that the neoliberal ideology can simultaneously empower and disempower learners.

To sum up, despite major setbacks in their language learning journeys at university, the participants were highly committed to the pursuit of English and the ideology that English would bring returns.

#### *7.3.3.2 English as an unchangeable reality*

This part addresses the reasons why the participants did not challenge the dominance of English and focusses on issues of fairness.

***Finding 6: The students did not dispute the dominance of English***

The focal students were more concerned about how to reap the perceived benefits of English than questioning the dominance of English. Daniel, for example, said that the position of English is 'unchangeable'; this is similar to Doiz and Lasagabaster's (2018, p.668) finding that the status of English was "unquestionable" for their students and Sung's (2020, p.9) students who accepted the "dominant status of English". Rather than question the dominance of English, Daniel, like the other participants, was more focused on enhancing his proficiency in English

so that he could 'stand out'. Overall, the pressure to compete for these students was more powerful than questioning why they needed to use English and whether it was fair. Though students felt disadvantaged with their lack of access to English and schooling experiences, they needed to align with the neoliberal understanding that the responsibility of capital accumulation is on the individual (Holborow, 2018). One of the tensions was that the students were trying to appease past disadvantages and compete in a system which positions failure as a lack of effort on the part of learners. The focus on competition found in this study relates to Piller and Cho's (2013) point that competition does not equate to civil liberty. The study participants were concerned about competing in the system laid out to them, and did not feel it worthwhile engaging in questions about fairness. This may have been due to a perceived lack of power to change this system. Overall, they accepted the dominance of English as an unchangeable reality.

This study found evidence of language dispossession (Phillipson, 2017) as the accumulation of English throughout the students' schooling came at the cost of Chinese literacy. Some participants preferred English medium instruction at university because, despite their struggles with English, English was perceived as easier than Chinese. Phillipson (2017) would view this as an injustice and a 'misuse' of English at the cost of literacies and knowledge in the students' first language. The students did not report feeling any unfairness with their lack of Chinese literacy and appeared to accept the reality that they were not fully literate in either language.

Most participants reported that their lecturers used English sources and the students seemed to trust knowledge production in English more than in Chinese. This reinforced their acceptance of English as the dominant academic lingua franca. In addition, English sources were more available online and in the university library database. This holds similarities with Sung's (2020) participants who accepted English as the language of academic publications and most useful for their knowledge enhancement. This also brings some evidence to the idea that university practices are skewed towards Anglophone and Western dominated knowledge production (Lillis, et al., 2010; Xu, Rose and Oancea, 2021). Though the students found reading academic articles in English a major challenge, reading in Chinese also caused problems and this may have lowered any resistance to English. Rather than question the legitimacy of English as an academic lingua franca, the participants focused on how they could learn to communicate using the register and style of the academic community. Enhancing their skills in academic communication would index their higher position in the learning community and give them more advantages (Schroedler, 2018). The students were therefore more focused on positioning themselves within the learning community than questioning the dominance of English as an academic lingua franca.

English for the students was part of a gatekeeping process in accessing their desired communities. More English linguistic capital meant more access to these communities. The findings above show that it would be difficult for students to resist the dominance of English, as English is ingrained into the practices of the university. This situation reflects the concern of Kirkpatrick (2011) who suggests that English in EMI universities serves to socialise students into an Anglo-Saxon paradigm, reducing exposure to ideas and knowledge through other languages.

#### 7.3.3.3 Belief in EMI

The last two parts focused on the participants' beliefs in the promise of English to enhance their prospects. The following part centres on the focal students' views towards the value of EMI.

***Finding 7: The student belief in EMI to enhance academic knowledge diminished and they became critical of the university's EMI provision. However, they continued to support EMI for the perceived status gains.***

This study raises questions about the quality of EMI education versus the need to enhance the competitiveness of students by using English as the instructional language. As the first year progressed, many of the students began to question the effectiveness of studying their content subjects in English. Most of the participants, for example, lamented their lecturers' use of English which made it more difficult for them to understand discipline knowledge. The participants also became critical of the university's provision of opportunities to build fluency and proficiency in English, including access to interactional opportunities with teachers and international students (in-class and out-of-class). This was made worse by the closure of the campus due to a political issue and the shift to online learning because of Covid-19. The focal students felt that the university and the lecturers were not enabling their success in an EMI environment, and most of the students had lowered their expectations regarding the EMI experience and their own trajectories with English enhancement. The lack of quality lecture delivery in English and interactional opportunities contributed to the students' questioning of whether teaching should be conducted in English. However, a key tension for the students was that instruction in Cantonese, though potentially increasing their discipline knowledge, may not gain them access to their desired communities. The students wanted the status of studying a degree programme in English which would help them in the graduate jobs market.



As one participant put it, EMI is an 'identifier' to other people. The status of English was therefore an overriding factor and the students remained committed to EMI provision despite increasingly seeing Cantonese as potentially more effective in enhancing content knowledge.

A significant reason why the participants felt that Cantonese instruction would enable more accumulation of discipline knowledge was that they did not think many of their lecturers had the language proficiency to teach in English. This finding contributes to a debate regarding teacher proficiency and EMI provision (e.g. Clarke, 2018; Dearden, 2014; Dearden and Macaro, 2016). In one study conducted by Inbar-Lourie and Donitsa-Schmidt (2020, p.307), students expected their lecturers to have "full control" of English as well as subject expertise, international awareness, pedagogical expertise and second language pedagogical expertise. These findings are similar to the findings in my study, however, the responses I received were more based around teacher proficiency and pedagogical expertise. The Inbar-Lourie and Donitsa-Schmidt study also found that students looked not only to increase content knowledge, but also their own English proficiency within discipline subjects. This is also reflective of my students who increasingly became critical that lecturers and the university were not keeping to their side of the bargain regarding quality EMI education. My participants felt that they were trying hard to enhance their language skills, but the quality of input and interactional opportunities did not complement this. This finding highlights that universities, which often have top-down EMI policies (Dearden, 2014; Macaro, et al., 2018), could better enhance the quality of English provision to fulfil the EMI promise.

English has high status in Hong Kong (Li, 2018) and students in this study enjoyed the status of being in an EMI environment. One key finding is that for many, the status of EMI was more influential than the quality of EMI. Though the participants were struggling in their proficiency pursuits, they were comforted at least that they would gain the status of studying at an EMI institution. The status of EMI was therefore a key ingredient for keeping the promise of English alive for these students, even though they struggled immensely with the language. This finding shows the power that English had over these students. According to Bourdieu (1991), linguistic capital indexes a person's position in a community and the higher the linguistic capital, the higher the potential to influence the community. Applied to the study participants, their ability to communicate in the academic learning community is one index of their status, position and influence. The participants struggled to integrate into this community, validate their linguistic capital and enhance their language skills, but still perceived that they would gain status from graduating from an EMI institution. Though they had lowered their expectations for proficiency gains, they still felt that EMI status was valuable.

#### 7.3.3.4 Developing multi-perspective thinking about EMI

The last part showed the wavering views of the participants towards EMI and their critique of the EMI experience. The following part discusses how the students increasingly viewed the issue of EMI from different perspectives and shows the impact of this new thinking on their relationship with English.

***Finding 8:*** *The students began to view EMI from different perspectives which led to more compromise and acceptance of their English journey*

As the year progressed, the focal students began to understand the issue of EMI from different perspectives. One perspective was that of the lecturers who are ‘forced to use English’ and ‘think about the foreign students’. There was an understanding that teaching in English was not voluntary but an institutional requirement. When taking on this perspective, the participants were positioning themselves with the lecturers as second language users in an EMI environment. This positioning was in tension with their position in the discussion above regarding their criticism of subject lecturers’ ability to teach in English. Some participants also viewed the issue of EMI from the university’s perspective. The understanding was that employers ‘rely on ranking’ and EMI is a factor in ranking, for example, through internationalisation. The higher the ranking, the higher students will be ‘commended’. Participants realised that the university also needed to compete, and this added legitimisation to maintenance of EMI. Witnessing the struggle of lecturers and understanding that the university itself was pressured into maintaining EMI policies, the students seemed to show acceptance of the reality of EMI. While being disappointed and critical of their EMI experience, the focal students also had a deeper understanding of the EMI situation from the perspectives of different stakeholders.

Observing that the university was part of a wider competition-based system may have reinforced neoliberal ideologies within the participants. As part of a wider system, the university needed to compete by maintaining English as the medium of instruction, and subsequently the lecturers needed to use English. The participants were therefore socialised into the practices of the university and wider norms within the education sector which promoted “particular versions of reality” (Darvin and Norton, 2016). The participants did not feel that these wider norms, which privilege English, could be challenged. Therefore their agency to resist dominant ways of thinking, which determine “modes of inclusion and exclusion, and the privileging and marginalization of ideas, people, and relations” was limited (Darvin and Norton, 2015, p.44). In this study, two contrasting impacts of these student realisations have been

found. Firstly, the students were critical of lecturers and the university for not fully operationalising their potential to compete in a market-oriented system, and secondly, more acceptance of their place within the system led them to compromise on the high hopes they held at the start of the academic year. These findings support Darwin and Norton's (2015) assertion that ideology is complex and multi-layered.

The discussions above show that the participants had complex relationships with English. Their ideological beliefs aligned with the neoliberal paradigm on the pursuit of marketing oneself through the accumulation of English linguistic capital. They had strong desires to become part of new communities which they perceived English could offer access. But they also experienced much pressure and frustration when channelling their English journey through this interpretation of reality. Their past learning experiences and struggle to enhance proficiency was a major part of this pressure and frustration. In addition, the students became critical of the EMI experience, but at the same time, grew to accept this EMI experience and understand the issue of EMI from different perspectives. Ultimately, they spent their energy surviving within the parameters of the EMI experience laid out to them and felt it futile to challenge the status quo. English, a commodity perceived to have high status and exchange value, was a much stronger force than challenging its dominance. Li (2002, p.50; 2018, p.4) describes Hong Kong people's relationship with English as a "love-hate complex", "dotted with psychological unease and discomfort". Li (2002) talks about how Hong Kong people see English as instrumentally valuable but also how opportunities to access English and difficulty in learning the language cause tension. Similarly, I witnessed tension within the participants who yearned for English but had struggled to attain their goals.

Darvin and Norton (2016, p.44) suggest that ideology is a "site of struggle" and that people "act within a spectrum of consent and dissent". This view of ideology was clearly reflected within the focal students. For example, though committing to the promise that English could increase their market worth (consent), some students challenged whether teaching in English was worthwhile (dissent). Students wanted to develop advanced language skills (consent), but some questioned whether it was necessary to have perfect grammar (dissent). Students subscribed to the view that English proficiency would bring status (consent), but after struggling to enhance their English, were ready to at least take the status of being an EMI student (dissent).

Figure 16 below shows the push and pull of the promise of EMI for the focal students. Overall, the students were committed to EMI at university, but they also had experiences and realisations which made them question whether EMI was worthwhile. The left side of Figure 16 shows common participant reflections which encouraged their commitment to EMI. The

students, for example, were aligned with the belief that increasing their English linguistic capital would bring rewards, and this was infused with the expectations of key stakeholders. The right side shows participant reflections that questioned the value of EMI. A major aspect of this was their limited proficiency gains during the first year and the quality of teaching in English. Overall, Figure 16 demonstrates a tension between the beliefs and experiences of the students in their first year. Though they were ideologically aligned with the market-oriented view of English, their consent to these beliefs was 'a site of struggle' because their experiences did not enable them to realise the promise of English. This highlights that EMI can be an exploitative force as it coerced these students into a belief system that was not fulfilled. EMI therefore did not always act in the best interests of these students.

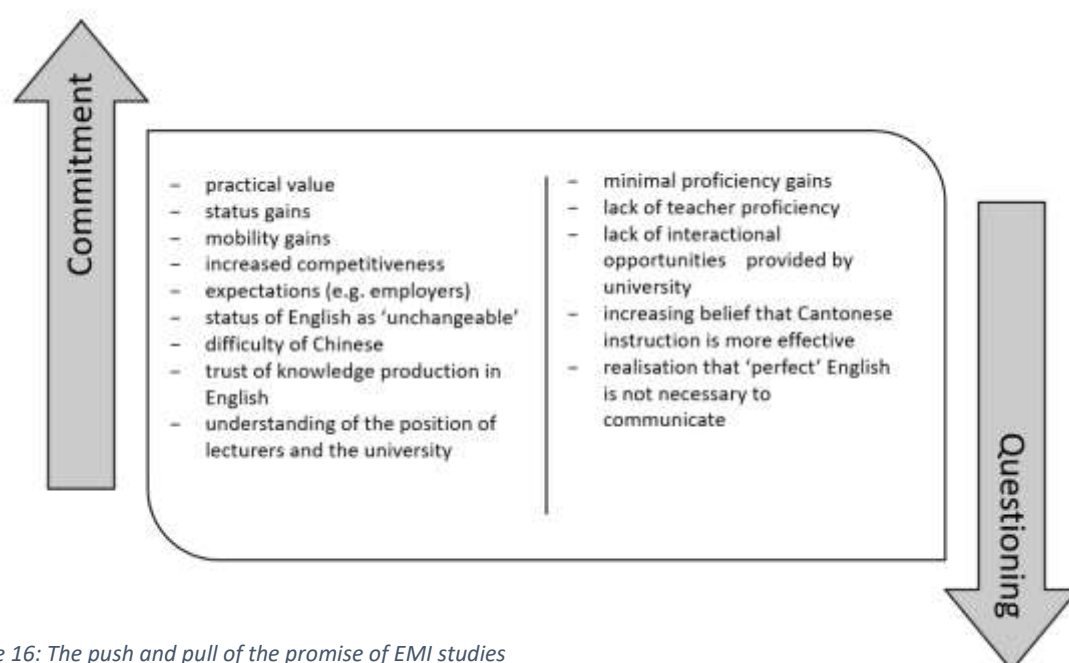


Figure 16: The push and pull of the promise of EMI studies

#### 7.3.4 Discussion summary

In 7.3, I have discussed the prominent experiences and reflections of the participants as they traversed their first year at an EMI university. I discussed that the salient positioning of the students was one of low English achiever, however, the students attempted to negotiate more acceptance and agency as they navigated the first year. In the discussion, I identified the prominent experiences which influenced the students' positioning at the beginning and across their first year. The above discussion also showed how the students held strong desires for English and how their desires caused tension and frustration with their ongoing difficulties with English at university. In the discussion, I pinpointed how expectations from various stakeholders fuelled desire for English and how despite their struggle, the participants

continued to invest in English. Lastly, I discussed how the participants' embedded language ideologies focused their investment in English, and how their language beliefs were a site of struggle as they began to question the worth of EMI.

## 7.4 Pedagogical implications and recommendations

In this section I will discuss the major implications of the research and offer recommendations for EAP practitioners and EMI universities. These implications and recommendations are framed from both a 'practical' and a 'transformative' perspective. The practical perspective relates to helping students to participate in their desired communities and the transformative perspective encourages critical questioning of the parameters of these communities. When offering the recommendations below, I have been wary of the boundaries between helping students to operate within the ideological systems which may reinforce their inequalities, and developing critical awareness of these ideological systems to foster more equitable subject positioning.

### 7.4.1 *Enhancing interactional opportunities*

This study has shown that lower proficiency students often struggle to participate in class and were silenced due to their lack of confidence and social embarrassment with English. Language teachers and discipline lecturers may interpret this as a lack of student interest in their subjects, however, this study has shown that the focal students were highly invested in their learning. The students also struggled to make contact with international students and access informal opportunities to send their English language trajectories upwards. The formal and informal learning experienced by the focal students frustrated and hindered their claim to more legitimate subject positions. The EMI experience could therefore better cater for students on the periphery to validate their position and promote their engagement in the learning community.

#### **Recommendation 1: Provide small group English opportunities**

In the study context, language classes were credit bearing and therefore high stakes for the students who required high GPAs to access further opportunities. Language classes therefore may have had the impact of heightening competitiveness and pushing students further to the periphery. This is the opposite of the aim of EAP which is to help students cope and communicate within the academic community. I agree with Park who stated that:

“Without systematic institutional and social support that can intervene in the devaluation of the marginalized group’s linguistic capital, simply offering English is in itself not likely to lead to successful social advancement of that group.” (Park, 2011, p.454)

More informal and low intimidation opportunities should therefore be provided by language centres to complement language classes. Small group activities such as mentoring (Kohnke and Jarvis, 2019) or tutorial style classes (Chapple, 2015) are ways in which this can be achieved. To incentivise these activities, microcredit can be given within students’ EAP subjects for participation, and teacher referrals and learning analytics can identify students who would benefit from such provision.

### **Recommendation 2: Provide more opportunities for internationalisation**

Like other studies have shown, Cantonese was the natural social lingua franca (Evans and Morrison, 2011a; Garner and Lau, 2019). The students had not developed an international network and reported minimal organised opportunities to meet international students. For many of the students, there were no international students on their programmes which suggests that internationalisation practices are uneven across the university. Some participants disengaged from pursuing interactions with international students, either from lack of confidence or thinking that it would reduce their performance in their studies. GPA was considered by many of the participants as a barrier to accessing exchange trip opportunities which added pressure on the focal students to attain high grades. The students became critical of the university’s provision for internationalisation and the lecturers’ facilitation of learning between local and international students. Contrary to the image portrayed on the university website, these students were not benefitting from internationalisation. The results showed that EMI does not necessarily equate with internationalisation (Lauridsen, 2020).

To better fulfil the promise of internationalisation, defined as the promotion of a “global civil society” that “promotes cultural diversity” (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p.11), EMI universities should ensure that students on the periphery have enough social opportunities to engage with students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. One way to achieve this is to have a dedicated language policy which includes “language-inclusivity awareness-raising activities” and “rewards and recognition for student-led activities” (Gardner and Lau, 2019, p.207). As lecturers have a key role in transforming institutional policies on internationalisation into “academic practices” (Lauridsen, 2020, p.19), universities should also provide training for lecturers to “lead by example” and provide in-class intercultural communication (Gardner and Lau, 2019, p.207). Lastly, lower proficiency students are arguably most in need of exchange trip opportunities, but fierce competition may exclude them from these activities. Universities could therefore ensure equitable participation in these types of programmes.

#### *7.4.2 Facilitating language acquisition*

This study identified an increasing gulf between students' desire for English and their proficiency gains, and supports research suggesting that strong self-visions do not necessarily impact proficiency levels (Al-Hoorie, 2018). Over the academic year, students struggled to complete assignments and express themselves in English. Facilitating language acquisition to help lower proficiency students engage in their learning and the academic community can help to provide a more equitable learning environment.

#### **Recommendation 3: Provide language acquisition opportunities which limit positioning students as lower achievers**

Commentators such as Marshall (2009) have criticised the remedial approach to language enhancement because of the positioning of students as problematic to universities. Studies (e.g. Rose et al., 2020a) have also suggested a need to provide language support for lower proficiency students, and provide different study journeys depending on proficiency and previous EMI experience (Aizawa and Rose, 2020; Rose, 2021). One of the problems for universities is therefore providing English support for lower proficiency students without implicating them as 'problem cases'. The voices of my participants were that they wanted to enhance their English skills in new and social ways. In addition to classroom-based provision, universities could therefore provide a range of alternative language enhancement opportunities. As mentioned above, small group activities could especially help these students to build their confidence and relationship with English. Regarding academic English, the participants appreciated the proficiency subject in their first semester, later however, some students surmised that not learning academic English in their first semester had further disadvantaged them. Echoing the suggestions of Curle, et al. (2020) and Rose, et al. (2020a), it may therefore be appropriate to provide subjects which introduce these learners to academic English earlier, especially ones that focus on discipline specific vocabulary (Rose, 2021). In summary, universities should support students' language enhancement while reducing the reinforcement of deficit English identities. A combination of social English, small group activities, and academic English provision could help students to achieve proficiency gains and avoid reinforcing student insecurities with English.

#### **Recommendation 4: Provide personalised, targeted and integrated vocabulary support**

This study has identified the specific language challenges of the focal students. Like other studies (e.g. Lin and Morrison, 2010; Evans and Morrison, 2016), vocabulary was a critical area affecting student comprehension and output. This especially led to difficulty in reading articles, citing sources and expressing themselves accurately using an appropriate academic tone. In line with the advice of Aizawa and Rose (2020) and Galloway and Ruegg (2020), more

focus can be placed on vocabulary support, especially discipline specific vocabulary (Rose, 2021).

One way to achieve personalised vocabulary support is to have dedicated weeks within an EAP course to offer student-teacher conferencing whereby students discuss their written work with EAP practitioners. Through this process, teachers can help students to reformulate and articulate their ideas using context appropriate vocabulary and tone. The incorporation of student-teacher conferencing within EAP provision would also help to value student contributions and rebalance the teacher-student relationship. Blended and flipped learning can integrate out-of-class vocabulary guidance and tasks, freeing up time for deeper in-class learning activities. Targeted vocabulary support could be provided through text analysis activities in which students are guided to analyse discipline specific texts and see language used in authentic contexts (Coxhead, 2016). Text analysis may be challenging for students transitioning from high school, especially those with lower proficiency, and therefore it needs to be conducted in a structured and scaffolded way with texts being carefully selected. However, these tasks will ultimately reposition students from being 'language learners' to 'language users' and empower them to develop autonomy in their vocabulary development. In terms of integrated vocabulary support, content lecturers could provide vocabulary glossaries and take time to explain discipline specific concepts. Following Galloway and Ruegg's (2020) recommendation, increased collaboration between EAP and content lecturers could help to ensure that students are gaining consistent and integrated vocabulary input transferrable across subjects. Collaboration between EAP practitioners and content lecturers is easier said than done and would require the support of senior management. In summary, a shift is needed in EAP to provide more integrated, personalised and targeted vocabulary development.

### **Recommendation 5: Provide more English support for discipline lecturers**

My research showed that one of the major impacts on the students was the English proficiency levels of many of their lecturers which led to a "compromised" learning experience (Sah and Karki, 2020, p.12). This compromised experience was not only in comprehending discipline knowledge but also in the students' enhancement of their own language skills. Like Inbar-Lourie and Donitsa-schmidt's (2020) participants, my participants expected to enhance their English in their lectures. This expectation was not met, and the focal students felt disappointed and frustrated with the EMI learning experience. Though understanding the challenges faced by lecturers in EMI settings, EMI programmes need to be carefully planned and implemented to avoid the kind of compromised experience my students received. Macaro, et al. (2018) argue for more professional development with discipline teachers to raise awareness about



how learners use language. Based on the voices of my participants, this training should also focus on the lecturers' use of English in teaching their students.

Professional development with content lecturers could also focus on pedagogy, especially fostering communication and interaction within the classroom (Chapple, 2015; Sahan, Rose and Macaro, 2021). This professional development could raise awareness about the challenges faced by lower proficiency students. Sung (2019), for example, suggests that lecturers could facilitate more discussion and turn-taking practices to better engage lower proficiency students. This would support my finding that the participants lacked confidence in engaging in class discussions and therefore the awareness and intervention of university lecturers could help to nurture a more egalitarian experience. This also supports the suggestion of Bradford (2019) to balance English proficiency professional development opportunities with an increased focus on pedagogical engagement. In summary, subject lecturers are crucial to the EMI experience. Universities should place resources on professional development which aims to enhance the delivery of content and facilitation of learning in English.

#### *7.4.3 Providing a transformative opportunity*

Sah and Karki (2020, p.13) argue that institutions adopting EMI should “critically account for the social, linguistic, cultural and economic backgrounds of their students” to avoid intensifying disadvantages. The results of my study show that the EMI experience had yet to offer the transformational experience students were hoping for and many had lowered their expectations.

#### **Recommendation 6: Listen to student voices on EMI**

Universities can listen to student voices about the language of instruction and more flexible practices could be more widely accepted. Universities, for example, do not need to take a blanket approach to EMI and could create more space for multilingual practices (Kirkpatrick, 2011; McKinley, Rose and Zhou, 2021; Phillipson, 2017). As Rose (2021) points out, teaching and learning without using all the shared languages of the teachers and learners could limit content learning. Rather than taking a top-down approach where all subjects are taught in English, universities could enable more department level decision making regarding the language of instruction to gain the benefits of English and local and national languages. Listening to a range of student voices in language of instruction decision making is crucial to enable a more equitable and balanced learning experience. My participants wanted to reap the perceived gains English would bring, but they also wanted to engage more deeply in their

discipline studies and began to question EMI. Like Macaro, et al. (2018) stated, depth of content learning should not be affected by EMI, but this was the case for my participants. By creating more flexibility in learning programmes, depending on the nature of the subject, the composition of classes, and the language abilities of lecturers, universities can balance depth of learning with the value of English. Also, as English and other languages are used in complex ways in the professions (Evans and Green, 2003), flexible approaches to the classroom languages may prepare students for their professional lives. In summary, students should contribute to shaping language policies and practices to ensure that justifiable language approaches are achieved. By taking more time to gain “a deeper appreciation of individuals’ needs, expectations, desires and aspirations” regarding English, universities can better facilitate an equitable and high-quality learning experience (Sung, 2019, p.201).

### **Recommendation 7: Develop students’ critical agency**

This study has shown firstly, how the participants positioned themselves as low English achievers and secondly, the pressure they experienced to use English as a tool for advancement in a competitive education system. This self-positioning and pressure constrained the learners as they attempted to participate in the learning community and engage in their studies. Some applied linguists have called for more exploration with students of their subject positioning and language ideologies to enable more critical and resilient stances in their English identities and language learning. Motha and Lin (2014, p.351) for example, suggest that learners can “develop critical agency in their language learning pursuits” by questioning their desires and rejecting deficit identities. Flores (2013, pp.517-518) suggests creating chances for students to reject the “universalizing narrative” of neoliberalism to “empower students to resist the corporatization of their language practices”. Kubota (2011) encourages more critical questioning of the role of English to highlight competing discourses to those that are commonly accepted.

To realise these aims, Benesch (2013, p.49) highlights that creating space in the pedagogy for “transformative moments” can be achieved through dialogue. This can help students to reach new levels of understanding and teachers can be open to capturing these moments and initiating analysing discussions with students. In addition to being ready for incidental transformative moments, EAP teachers can plan activities which encourage exploration of themes related to language and power, for example, discussions on using L1 in the classroom. One practical example of how this can be implemented is described by Rose and Galloway (2017) who asked students to research and debate the Speak Good English Campaign promoted in Singapore. Comments from the students suggest that they valued this type of debate and were able to critically reflect on standard language ideologies. Small group

activities such as academic mentoring would also provide opportunities for students to develop their critical agency and facilitate critical and positive relationships with English. As one focal participant put it “the [EC] subject is still like learning [...] but in mentoring, it’s more like exploring English”. Part of the transformative nature of small group opportunities is to help students make sense of their experiences to act as a “psychological resource for development” (Imai, 2010, p.288).

By integrating more scope for these types of transformative moments, EAP teachers can help students to contest and realign issues of ownership over English and the legitimacy of speakers. This aligns with Marshall’s (2009, p.55) assertion that by listening to the voices of students, “university educators can nudge the recursive relationship between structure and agency in a positive inclusive direction”. It can also help to encourage practitioners to view lower proficiency students as aspiring students rather than through a deficit or problematic lens (Rawal and De Costa, 2019). Overall, this approach can help to endorse the “exploratory spirit” (Noels, 2009; p.303) within learners, validate their position within the learning community and provide space for their identity projects and upward trajectories. However, this needs to be conducted carefully to ensure that there is no reinforcement of students’ positioning on the periphery. Opportunities for EAP teachers to raise their awareness of the affective needs of students is needed, as this extends their traditional role.

## 7.5 Contribution of research

In this section I discuss the significance of the study and the potential contribution to the EAP / EMI fields.

### *7.5.1 A deeper understanding of the transition to EMI university*

A significant contribution of my study is the new understanding of how students traverse their first year in EMI university settings. This contributes to a growing body of transition studies in non-Anglophone countries assessing the challenges and experiences of EMI students (e.g. Aizawa and Rose, 2020; Evans and Morrison, 2011a; 2011b; 2016; Galloway and Ruegg, 2020; Macaro, et al., 2019). My study goes beyond language-related challenges to understanding the many influences on the student experience. The journey through hope, disappointment, criticism, compromise and connection revealed the affective as well as linguistic struggle of the students. Using a poststructuralist approach, the study shows how the focal students attempted to assert themselves in the new learning environment and the challenges they faced to overcome past disadvantages with English. This study confirms a view of English as a social practice, the ongoing negotiation of identity and positionality and

the striving for agency (Norton and Toohey, 2011). Having a deeper understanding of the transition to university studies in English can help university decision makers and EAP practitioners plan inclusive programmes which support students through the transition period.

#### *7.5.2 Understanding the voices of lower proficiency students across year 1*

Minimal research has focused on the experiences of lower English-proficiency students in EMI university contexts. The research conducted by Evans and Morrison (2018) and Aizawa and Rose (2020) compared students schooled in English or their first languages and the effects this had on the transition to university. These studies revealed the challenges non-EMI (overall of lower proficiency) students face in transitioning to EMI university. Building on these studies, my results produced a deep picture of how lower proficiency students strived to assert themselves and contend with English. Rather than a comparative approach, I focused in-depth on the journeys of lower proficiency students. One of the most closely aligned studies with my research, in terms of methodological approach, is Teng's (2018) study of Chinese university EFL learners. Though the context of Teng's study is different, the findings are similar. This includes the striving to move from the periphery of the learning community to the centre, and the critique of the learning environment. My study adds to the few studies which explore the issues of struggling and lower proficiency students using in-depth qualitative methods. In summary, there are few studies focusing on lower proficiency students in EMI contexts. My study deepens existing research, especially more quantitative-oriented studies, by not only focusing on the challenges these students faced, but also how these challenges affected their positionality, investment and trajectories. My results closely support other studies using similar methods (e.g. Teng, 2018), but differs in context.

#### *7.5.3 Understanding the value of EMI from the student perspective*

Another contribution my study makes is in understanding the complex ways in which students value EMI. My results support studies (e.g. Galloway, Numajiri and Rees, 2020; Liu, 2019) showing that students value EMI for the enhanced mobility and employability prospects. My study also shows additional reasons for the participants' commitment to EMI. These include their increasing understanding of the pressure of lecturers and the university in maintaining EMI, and their assessment that the status of English is unchallengeable. As well as showing the students' commitment to English, my results showed how students began to question EMI. Like other studies (e.g. Sah and Karki, 2020), the promise of English did not live up to

expectations and this adds to a debate among applied linguists (e.g. Block, 2013; Park; 2016; Park and Wee; 2013; Piller and Cho, 2013) as to whether the promise of English reinforces social inequalities. My results have highlighted that the participants held complex views towards English influenced by their experiences and ideological orientations (which were often in conflict). These results can help EAP instructors understand in a more intricate way the power English has over English learners. This can create space and opportunities for the recognition and facilitation of transformative moments to facilitate new trajectories for lower proficiency students.

#### *4.5.4 Understanding the connection between EMI and language development*

This study supports existing studies (e.g. Aizawa and Rose, 2020; Evans and Morrison, 2011a; 2011b; Kamaşak, Sahan and Rose, 2021) showing the linguistic struggles students encounter in EMI settings. Vocabulary was identified as a particular challenge for the participants and this finding mirrors those of studies in similar and different contexts (e.g. Aizawa and Rose, 2020; Lin and Morrison, 2010). Like other studies (e.g. Chapple, 2015; Lei and Hu, 2014; Sert, 2008), my results have shown a tenuous link between EMI and language proficiency gains. This growing body of research suggests that proficiency enhancement is not an automatic by-product of EMI and therefore EMI programmes need to be carefully planned. In addition, my study highlighted the pressure that lower proficiency students experience to enhance their language in EMI settings. Firstly, the participants perceived that they were behind 'more fluent' peers. Secondly, there was a tension between students' desire for English and their language struggles. The affective toll of proficiency challenges in EMI settings is a less reported aspect of the EMI and language development debate. Overall, my study has shown that there is a need for integrated language support where EMI and language learning are in "symbiosis" (Pecorari and Malmström, 2018, p.511), and language provision goes beyond EAP classes.

#### *7.5.5 Taking a unique ethnographic approach*

This study also makes a methodological contribution to the EMI field. Few existing studies have taken ethnographic approaches to study the student experience of EMI at university. Some studies adopted narrative inquiry to track individual students (e.g. Sung, 2019; Teng, 2019) or have conducted longitudinal studies using a mix of both quantitative and qualitative methods (e.g. Evans and Morrison, 2011a; 2011b). Ethnographic studies focusing on the first year experience are rare within EMI research and by focusing on 10 students, I was able to

find “sociocultural regularities” and their “variable extents” (Wortham and Rhodes 2012, p.84), as in, I was able to identify the common timescales and experiences which influenced the students and show how their unique responses shaped their positionality and trajectories.

One unique aspect of my methodological approach was the inclusion of weekly mentoring meetings with the students. These meetings successfully enabled me to get to know the students on a deeper level which meant that when we conducted the interviews, the students were more comfortable in sharing their experiences and insights. This helped to reach Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) interpretation of the interview as an extended conversation and a co-constructed event. As one participant put it – ‘it’s just like chatting’. The weekly mentoring meetings were aimed to be part of an inclusive methodology which befitted the students as well as my research.

## 7.6 Limitations of the study

A critique of the study is that the students did not use their first language to express their views, thus limiting their voice and articulation of their experiences. This is especially the case for lower proficiency students who may struggle to find the words to express themselves. Other studies (e.g. Sung, 2019) conducted research with participants in Cantonese, and Evans and Morrison (2011a; 2011b; 2016) hired research assistants to conduct interviews in Cantonese and translate them into English. There are many trade-offs in choosing the language for data collection. The influence of translation is one consideration if conducting the research in Cantonese. However, if the students had been able to express themselves in Cantonese, they may have more clearly articulated their thoughts. In reflection, the design of the research was aimed to benefit the participants by providing spaces for English interaction. It was this space which enabled access to the students and their continued commitment. Overall, the approach worked and although students had some challenges in expressing themselves, they used multilingual resources (e.g. each other / online dictionaries) to find and negotiate meaning. It can be argued that this was a useful process for them. However, in future, I could provide more space for participants to take advantage of their full linguistic repertoires.

As mentioned in section 7.5.5, the mentoring provision was a positive and unique way to engage the participants and gain deep responses. However, what is not clear is the impact of the mentoring on the students’ perspectives and therefore whether the results would be generalizable beyond this group of students. The mentoring opened up a space for the participants to discuss and realign themselves with English and they may have travelled further along in their thinking than peers. Like the previous point about using English in the

study, the use of mentoring was both a strength and limitation of the study. The strength being that without the mentoring, I would not have been able to attract the students and explore the themes in detail. The weakness was that I created the space and may have influenced the participants thinking, not only in my views but what I represent as a language teacher from an Anglophone country. In future, I can continue to take a reflexive approach. I can build on my reflexive skills to enable transparency about the data collection methods and my impact on the collection and writing up of the data.

## 7.7 Future directions

The findings of this research can be built on in various ways. The themes that emerged could be tested on a wider cohort of students to see how far they resonate. To achieve this, a questionnaire and focus groups could be conducted at the end of year 1 asking students to reflect on their EMI experiences. In addition to a focus on linguistic challenges, which have been identified in other research in the same context (e.g. Evans and Morrison, 2011a; 2011b; 2018; Shepard and Morrison, 2021), this research could focus on student perceptions of proficiency gains, the affective experience of EMI and the study reality. By understanding the affective experience and study pressure of EMI, this research would be useful for EAP practitioners and content lecturers in providing a humanistic learning experience to complement content delivery. The study of Galloway, Numajiri and Rees (2020) on how EMI is operationalised is useful as a starting point for this type of research.

Another direction for my research would be to focus on final year students who entered university with a lower English proficiency. This research could build upon the findings of this PhD study by investigating how students position themselves with English at the end of university and whether they were able to achieve their proficiency goals and gain closer affinity with English, seeing it as an integrated part of their linguistic repertoires. This research could also focus on the strategies these students employed to overcome any perceived disadvantages and challenges they faced. This research could take a case study approach including questionnaires and interviews with students, and other data such as GPA and English test scores. Understanding if and how these final year students overcame proficiency and affective challenges would be very useful for informing EMI language policy and provision to ensure that lower proficiency students could integrate into the university.

Finally, as an EAP practitioner, I look for research-informed practical teaching methods and ideas. However, applied linguists often do not have EAP teaching experience, and EAP practitioners often do not have the experience and incentives to conduct research. This has

produced a situation where TESOL research has become overly theoretical (Rose, 2019b) and hence, not very practical, and classroom-based research by EAP teachers is not always well-framed in theory and methodology. I think therefore that I could occupy some central ground by producing high quality classroom-based research. Based on my earlier recommendations, practical ideas for blended and flipped EAP provision would be one area of focus. Ultimately, this would leave space for deeper activities such as student-teacher conferencing and mentoring, and this could pave the way for a more equitable EAP experience which does not silence lower proficiency students and push them further to the periphery of the learning community. Practical student-informed ideas on how to conduct conferencing and mentoring and how to blend this into EAP provision would be very useful in redefining EAP from being prescriptive to more constructivist.

## 7.8 Final thoughts

EMI adoption is a growing trend within universities in non-Anglophone countries. As more universities feel pressure to provide programmes in English, it is important to ensure that this provision is well thought out and equitable. Lower proficiency students should be able to benefit from university and not be positioned on the periphery because of English. They should also be enabled to gain from the promises of English. This is the delicate balance which needs careful consideration when implementing EMI programmes and providing EAP support. By listening to the voices of students, this research has endeavoured to find practical and transformational solutions to inform future EMI provision.



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# APPENDICIES

## 1. Ethics Approval Form

*Note: The form below has the original thesis title, which was later changed.*



10<sup>th</sup> December 2018

Dear Andrew

**Principal Investigator:** Andrew Jarvis

**Supervisor:** Vahid Parvaresh

**Project Title:** *Student attitudes towards English and social mobility at an internationalising English-medium university in Asia.*

I am pleased to inform you that your ethics application has been approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Panel (FREP)/Departmental Research Ethics Panel (DREP) under the terms of Anglia Ruskin University's Research Ethics Policy (Dated 8 September 2016, Version 1.7). Approval by DREP is subject to ratification by the FREP.

Ethical approval is given for a period of 1 year for Postgraduate students, from 10<sup>th</sup> December 2018. If your research will extend beyond this period, it is your responsibility to apply for an extension before your approval expires.

It is your responsibility to ensure that you comply with Anglia Ruskin University's Research Ethics Policy and the Code of Practice for Applying for Ethical Approval at Anglia Ruskin University available at [www.anglia.ac.uk/researchethics](http://www.anglia.ac.uk/researchethics) including the following.

- The procedure for submitting substantial amendments to the committee, should there be any changes to your research. You cannot implement these amendments until you have received approval from FREP/DREP for them.
- The procedure for reporting accidents, adverse events and incidents.
- The General Data Protection Requirement and Data Protection Act (2018).
- Any other legislation relevant to your research. You must also ensure that you are aware of any emerging legislation relating to your research and make any changes to your study (which you will need to obtain ethical approval for) to comply with this.
- Obtaining any further ethical approval required from the organisation or country (if not carrying out research in the UK) where you will be carrying the research out. This includes other Higher Education Institutions if you intend to carry out any research involving their students, staff or premises. Please ensure that you send the FREP/DREP copies of this documentation if required, prior to starting your research.
- Any laws of the country where you are carrying the research and obtaining any other approvals or permissions that are required.
- Any professional codes of conduct relating to research or requirements from your funding body (please note that for externally funded research, where the funding has been obtained via Anglia Ruskin University, a Project Risk Assessment must have been carried out prior to starting the research).
- Completing a Risk Assessment (Health and Safety) if required and updating this annually or if any aspects of your study change which affect this.
- Notifying the FREP/DREP Secretary when your study has ended.

Please also note that your research may be subject to monitoring.

Should you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me. May I wish you the best of luck with your research.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sebastian Rasinger', followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Dr Sebastian Rasinger  
Chair, School Research Ethics Panel  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Date 20.6.18  
V1.3

## 2. Participant Information Sheet

*Note: The form below has the original thesis title, which was later changed.*



### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

#### Section A: The Research Project

1. **Title of project**
2. Title of the project: *Student attitudes towards English and social mobility at an internationalising English-medium university in Asia*
3. **Brief summary of research.**  
This study investigates student experiences of English. It especially looks at how motivated students are to invest time in English at university, the status of English and students' relationship with it, and whether students see English as a way to achieve success in the future.
4. **Purpose of the study**  
This research is for PhD research at Anglia Ruskin University in the UK.
5. **Name of my Supervisor**  
Dr. Vahid Parvaresh, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Anglia Ruskin University.
6. **Why have you been asked to participate?**  
You are being asked to participate because you are in year 1, and you are taking an ELC subject this semester.
7. **How many people will be asked to participate?**  
10-12 students.
8. **What are the likely benefits of taking part?**  
You can practise English and develop your academic English identity.
9. **Can I refuse to take part?**  
Yes, you can refuse to take part. You are under no obligation to take part.
10. **Will refusing to take part affect my grades?**  
No. It will not affect your grades.
11. **Has the study got ethical approval?**  
The study has ethical approval from the Faculty Ethics Committee at Anglia Ruskin University. The ELC has also given permission for the study.
12. **What will happen to the results of the study?**  
Results will be used for academic conference presentations and publications. Any personal data will be anonymised.
13. **Contact for further information**  
andrew.jarvis@pgr.anglia.ac.uk

## *Section B: Your Participation in the Research Project*

1. **What will I be asked to do?**

You will be asked to take part in three interviews over the academic year. You will also be asked to write three reflections. The interviews will take place in the CILL (A305) and the timing will be arranged to fit in with your study schedule.

2. **Will my participation in the study be kept confidential?**

All data will be anonymised when writing up the PhD and when publishing the research. This means that your name will not appear in any publications. Data will be kept on a password protected computer in a locked office. Only the researcher and two supervisors will have access to this data. Some quotes may be used when publishing the research and these will be anonymised. You will not be given copies of interviews but you can request these. All data will be deleted after one year of the end of the PhD. A summary of the data findings will be shared with you.

3. **Are there any possible disadvantages or risks to taking part?**

Taking part in this study will not negatively affect your grades. Sometimes I will ask about your personal language learning history. If you feel any questions are intrusive, you can stop the interviews. If your study load gets too high, we can rearrange interviews or cancel them.

4. **Whether I can withdraw at any time, and how.**

You can withdraw from the study at any time and without giving a reason. You can also ask for your data to be removed from the study. You can withdraw by telling or emailing me.

5. **Contact details for complaints.**

If you have any complaints about the study, you can contact my supervisor:  
[vahid.parvaresh@anglia.ac.uk](mailto:vahid.parvaresh@anglia.ac.uk)

You can also send an email or letter to the following addresses.

Email address: [complaints@anglia.ac.uk](mailto:complaints@anglia.ac.uk)

Postal address: Office of the Secretary and Clerk, Anglia Ruskin University, Bishop Hall Lane, Chelmsford, Essex, CM1 1SQ.

### 3. Participant Consent Form

*Note: The form below has the original thesis title, which was later changed.*



#### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

##### NAME OF PARTICIPANT:

Title of the project: *Student attitudes towards English and social mobility at an internationalising English-medium university in Asia*

Main investigator and contact details: Andrew Jarvis: [andrew.jarvis@pgr.anglia.ac.uk](mailto:andrew.jarvis@pgr.anglia.ac.uk)

1. I agree to take part in the above research. I have read the Participant Information Sheet for the study. I understand what my role will be in this research, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
2. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, without giving a reason.
3. I am free to ask any questions at any time before and during the study.
4. I understand what will happen to the data collected from me for the research.
5. I have been provided with a copy of this form and the Participant Information Sheet.
6. I understand that quotes from me will be used in the dissemination of the research.
7. I understand that the interview will be recorded.

Data Protection: I agree to the University<sup>1</sup> processing personal data which I have supplied. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me\*

Name of participant (print).....Signed.....Date.....

Name of person witnessing consent (print).....Signed..... Date.....

PARTICIPANTS MUST BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS FORM TO KEEP

ADD DATE AND VERSION NUMBER OF CONSENT FORM.

---

#### I WISH TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY.

If you wish to withdraw from the research, please speak to the researcher or email them at [andrew.jarvis@pgr.anglia.ac.uk](mailto:andrew.jarvis@pgr.anglia.ac.uk) stating the title of the research.

You do not have to give a reason for why you would like to withdraw.

Please let the researcher know whether you are/are not happy for them to use any data from you collected to date in the write up and dissemination of the research.

Date 10.09.2019. V1.1

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<sup>1</sup> "The University" includes Anglia Ruskin University and its Associate Colleges.

## 4. Reflection instructions

### **Reflection 1**

Thank you for sharing your thoughts in this reflection. Please write about your experiences of learning English before university, and your attitudes, feelings and hopes about English at university and for your future.

### **Reflection 2**

Thank you for sharing your thoughts in this reflection. Please reflect on your experiences of English at university so far. You can choose what to write about but possible topics include: positive experiences or challenges you have faced with English; differences in learning style between school and university; your motivation and confidence levels with English; and any changes in your attitudes, feelings and hopes about English.

### **Reflection 3**

Thank you for sharing your thoughts in this reflection. Please reflect on your English journey at university over your first year. You can choose what to write about but possible topics include motivation; improvement; confidence; challenges; disadvantages; and any changes in your attitudes, feelings and hopes about English.



## 5. Example reflection

### Reflection 1

First of all, I think I'm quite weak in English. The result of my English level in HKDSE is only Level 3. To talk about the feeling of English, I'm quite afraid to communicate with others using English, because I not good at elaborate a sentence and present it in front of people. Also, I did not have a foundation of grammar, so I have less confidence in talking English. To talk about the previous learning experience in English. I didn't study hard about grammar, so I can't write or talk sentences in the correct way. While I was in secondary school, I used to have a low mark of grammar test. Sometimes I mix up the adverb or adjective while I was writing an article and I got confused about it.

To summarize the way that I feel about English, I would like to talk about reading. I don't read English book a lot in the previous year, so I'm not good at understanding the meaning of the article. It leads that I can't maintain the correct direction for finding the answer. For the listening part, I know that everyone has a different accent of speaking. But sometimes when people talk too fast or too quiet, I can't hear clearly. It shows that I'm not good at listening to English, and I used to fail the listening test in the past. Besides these two-part, I think I'm quite good at writing and speaking. Cause I will discover some vocabulary to enrich my speech or article and make them more fruitful. I think the main reason for learning English is because I want to improve the grammar skills of English and speak it fluently in front of others. Even, correct the mistakes of grammar and boost the confidence of speaking English. I think nowadays English is an international language, we use English to communicate with others whose first language is not Cantonese. I would like to improve the skills of English and having a cheerful conversation with others. I think learning English could help me to prepare myself for my future career. I can connect with the global and explore more in my dream career with different people from other countries.



## 7. Interview protocol

The following sets of interview questions provide an insight into the types of questions asked during the interviews. These questions were used for reference during the interviews. As described in Chapter 3, the interviews aimed to be conversation-based and therefore each interview differed in the questions asked.

### Interview 1

#### Language background

- Which languages do you speak?
- Which languages do you use at home?
- What was the language of instruction at school?
- How did you learn English?
- Who helped you with English when you were a school pupil?
- Can you describe your experience of learning English at school?
- How do you feel about the way you learnt English?

#### Experience at university so far

- How much English have you used in class or on campus so far?
- Based on this initial experience, how do you feel about doing your studies in English at university?
- Do you feel confident to participate in class using English?
- How do you feel about having to do six credits of English in year 1?
- Tell me about your experiences in the lectures so far? How much can you understand your lecturers?
- What do you think of your English? What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- Why do you want to enhance your English?
- How do you hope to improve your English at university?
- What are your main reasons for joining the mentoring scheme?
- Do you think learning academic English is important? Why? Why not?

#### Importance of English

- How important do you think English is to your success at university?
- How important is it in getting a graduate job?
- How important is English to your sense of being a global citizen?
- Where does your motivation to study / practice English come from?

- How has society / school / university / your teachers / family influenced you to improve your English?
- Are you glad that this university teaches in English? Why? Why not?
- Do you think English will continue to be important in Hong Kong? Why? Why not?

## **Interview 2**

### Overall reflection

- Can you describe your first semester at university? How about your English experience over the first semester?
- How much English did you use in semester 1? In which situations? Did you use English more or less English than you thought?
- Are you still happy with this university teaching subjects in English? Why? Why not?
- How do you feel about the results and feedback you received for your EC assignments? How about other assignments? Did English affect your results?
- What feelings did you experience in semester 1 in relation to English?
- What has had the biggest positive / negative impact on your English?

### Motivation / investment

- How did your motivation levels to develop your English change over semester 1? What affected these changes? Do you still feel hopeful and positive about English?

### Challenges / progress

- What challenges did you face with English in semester 1? What did you improve? Overall, have your English skills developed? To what extent?
- Are you pleased with the progress of your English?
- Which aspects of your English have you developed so far at university?

### Learning style / opportunities

- What do you think of the learning style so far in your English classes and other subjects? Is it different to your school experiences?
- How have you coped with learning English in a freer way? Have you found any new ways to enhance your English?
- Have you had any 'authentic' learning experiences?
- Have you interacted with any international students?
- How could the EC and university provide better opportunities to enhance students' English?

### Confidence / communication skills

- Have you become more confident with English since entering this university? What affected this?
- How do you feel when you communicate with other students and teachers in English?
- To what extent have you enhanced your communication skills in English at university?

### Semester 2

- What are your hopes or goals for semester 2?
- How do you want to enhance your English in semester 2? Which aspects do you want to work on? Is this different from semester 1?
- What are your motivation levels with English now? Are they higher or lower than the start of semester 1? Why? Are you going to invest more or less time in English?
- What will you do differently in semester 2? i.e. What did you learn from semester 1?
- How important is English to your success in semester 2? Since the start of semester 1, do you think you place more or less importance on English?
- How are you feeling about taking your next EC subject?

### Attitudes towards English

- How have your attitudes or feelings towards English changed since the start of semester 1?
- To what extent will English enable you to fulfil your goals? Is English holding you back in any way?
- Do you feel any pressure to do well in English? Where does this pressure come from?
- Is it fair that English is the international language? Why do think this?

## **Interview 3**

### Overall

- Can you describe your English journey over year 1?
- What opportunities did you have to use English at university? Was this different from what you expected?
- Did you interact with any international students? Why / why not?
- What were the main challenges you found with English?

### Improvements

- Did you improve as much as expected? If not, why?
- What improvements did you make in English?

- Which areas did not improve as much as expected?
- What were the main reasons for any improvement?

### Motivation / investment

- How did your motivation change over this academic year?
- Do you feel more, or less, positive about English compared with the start of the academic year?
- Do you feel more, or less, connection or ownership with English at the end of the academic year?
- How much time did you invest in your English over the past academic year?
- Do you think this was more or less than other students?
- To what extent is it worth investing time in English at university?
- Did you feel any pressure to spend time on English? Where did this pressure come from?

### Confidence

- How did your confidence levels with English change over the year?
- Do you feel more, or less, confident with English now?
- What helped or did not help with confidence building?

### Learning style / EMI

- How did you adjust to the learning style at university? What challenges did you find?
- Did English advantage or disadvantage you in your major subjects? How?
- What percentage of the classes did lecturers speak English? Could you understand them? Why / why not?
- Did English-medium instruction affect your learning? Would you have preferred some subjects in Cantonese?
- Did you speak with lecturers in English? How about classmates?
- How would you describe the language levels of the lecturers?
- Are you happy that this university teaches in English?
- What are the differences between learning English at university and school?
- How did online learning affect your English development?
- In what ways did the campus closure and Covid-19 affect your English journey?

### Attitudes towards English

- How have your views to English changed over the past year? Has this year made you more positive or negative about English?

- Do you still feel that English is important for your success in the future? How will it help you?
- Do you think English will hold you back in the future or enable you?

Research process / mentoring

- Have the mentoring sessions / exploring English together helped you? How?
- Do you think mentoring is a good way to develop English and study skills? Why / why not? How is mentoring different from previous English learning experiences?

## 6. Example interview transcript

[...]

**Andrew:** All right. Can you tell me which languages you speak?

**Student:** I speak Cantonese and other than that I speak English also, usually, in this class.

**Andrew:** Do you speak any Putonghua?

**Student:** I know Putonghua but I definitely not speak it well.

**Andrew:** Do you think your English is a higher level than Putonghua?

**Student:** I think my Putonghua is better than English.

**Andrew:** Really.

**Student:** Yes. Because my English level is very low.

**Andrew:** At home, which language do you speak?

**Student:** Cantonese because my parents also say Cantonese to me.

**Andrew:** Do they speak English with you?

**Student:** Because they do not have a good academic background before. So they don't know English very well. We always talk in Cantonese only.

**Andrew:** What about like at school, how old were you when you first started studying English?

**Student:** First start is my primary school, around seven or eight years old. But I got a terrible experience learning English before. It's quite difficult to me because I don't understand what the teachers say and lack of some vocabularies. So, I don't really understand some readings so I always fail in my exam. [chuckles]

**Andrew:** Even at primary school, did you find English difficult?

**Student:** Primary school, it was really hard for me to read English. In that moment I hate English very much because I feel that it's very difficult and I always get behind of my classmates. They always get A in the exam but I only got about 60 marks just C or B. But luckily, I got A in my primary six. So I can get easy to pass the secondary school.

**Andrew:** That's good. How did you learn English at primary school?

**Student:** How to learn, just listening to the teachers and do some revision for - I think, in Hong Kong, this is spoon-feeding. We're just copying and copying but we don't understand actually, the words, how to use it in just normal day.

**Andrew:** Do you think that was a good way to learn English?

**Student:** I think this is not a good way. I think we should learn English in some informal way just for communication is okay. Not just use some academic words to show your English level in the exam to let the examiner know you as better in English.

**Andrew:** Mmm.

**Student:** In primary school, I always do the paper. Always do a paper and some grammar, I don't really understand how to use but we just follow the example and copy, copy, and copy. So, I hate doing it.

**Andrew:** How about secondary school? You said you did well at primary school in the final exam, so erm did you go to an English secondary school?

**Student:** My English level is got 3 in DSE and I study very hard in my senior form because my teacher is very good and very helpful to let me do more exercise and teach me some words to - let the examiner to know my English level because I don't really think this a good way for me to learn English.

**Andrew:** It was more like preparation for the DSE exam.

**Student:** Yes, but I think, the most difference between primary school and secondary school is the attitude. Because I know English is very important in secondary school to university. It's a common language that we use in university so I really want to get improved on it and know the literature, what they say and get improve on my other study.

**Andrew:** When did that change in attitude take place? Was it at junior secondary or senior secondary?

**Student:** In junior form, I think, it's just similar to the primary school. Just learn some detail in your primary school but in senior form, we get more deeper. We learn more difficult words so I don't know how to use the words.

**Andrew:** Did you have much practice with usage?

**Student:** I got English skill, just some old students come back to school and teach you some writing skills or get some oral practice in lunchtime. But it's just before the DSE, about one year in my form five.

**Andrew:** Were all your subjects taught in English?

**Student:** I think my secondary school is learn in English but the teacher always say Cantonese because they just scared about me cannot listen to her and don't know what to do in this next lesson so they always speak Cantonese but they can teach in English, too.

**Andrew:** OK. Do you think that was an effective way to learn?

**Student:** I think English lesson ... is more easy to learn by English than Cantonese but because of my English is bad, I know the teachers say when is talking Cantonese.

**Andrew:** Yeah, yeah.

**Student:** English is also okay but I cannot do many comments for her because I don't know how to say and just like other students to guess what's going on.

**Andrew:** You said you didn't think your English was very good but how about your classmates, were they similar to you or different?

**Student:** My class have some peoples better than me or also they just get more lower. Some of them have some English lesson in kindergarten they always see their fluent teacher. So, they taught English in small age but I don't think we have this chance. Thanks to my primary school, this terrible experience, I hate English in that moment.

**Andrew:** Did your family help much with your English or did you attend like any tutorial schools, that kind of thing?

**Student:** I actually joined some tutorial class in my form 2 because I think, I think it's very important to my English but after I go to tutorial class they still gave me a lot of failure to do. I got the lower mark than before.

**Andrew:** Did you always want to go to university or did that happen later?

**Student:** Err I think it's happened later. I don't care about join into university or not because I think it's not very important. I really want to get some more practical to get help in my field.

**Andrew:** Let's talk about experience at university so far. Have you needed to use English at university so far?

**Student:** I think we use English most times in Jason's [pseudonym] class. Just like I would do some practice and always communicate with other in English. But in our class we also speak Cantonese and for mathematics we need to listen to the lecturers from the Mainland but their accent is quite different to our Hong Kong so we do not really understand what they say.

**Andrew:** OK. How about the Hong Kong lecturers? Do they speak English?

**Student:** It's more common that we can understand their accent and tone.

**Andrew:** You're more familiar with the Hong Kong English so it's easier to understand?

**Student:** Yes.

**Andrew:** Do you speak English with any classmates not including the EC lesson?

**Student:** Few. I don't have a chance to talk with the foreigners. My friend always speak in Cantonese so we don't use English to communicate with other in normal day.

**Andrew:** OK. Would you like to meet more international students?

**Student:** Yes, sure.

**Andrew:** Do you have any opportunities to do that?

**Student:** I think play video game. When I play video game I always meet some new friend through it though but some of them may not say in English, just other country's language. But no need so we can get some communication on the game.

**Andrew:** You mean you're playing like an online game?

**Student:** Yeah.

**Andrew:** Can you hear them speak or is it more like text?



**Student:** We have a platform so we can chat with them first time in a platform. I can hear but sometime I don't know what they say because of their mother language is different.

**Andrew:** In that game, does anybody use English? Is that the common language?

**Student:** Most of the time, yes, English.

**Andrew:** That's very interesting. So, how do you feel about doing university studies in English?

**Student:** I think it's more easy than secondary school because in the university, they just do not use many academic words and teach you many pattern in your writing. So we can just write in our own words or some different words to show the same meaning.

**Andrew:** Are you happy that this university is like an English medium university or would you prefer it to be teaching in Cantonese?

**Student:** I prefer it to teach in English is because in our daily life, I do not have many opportunity to use, speak in English. So I cannot just practice the English skill in speaking. But it's lucky to meet Jason because he's a fun guy and just like we get interested in his English lesson.

**Andrew:** How do you feel about having to take like the ELC classes because you have to take two classes in year one?

**Student:** I think it's just fine to finish these two class because I think it's ... interesting things that I can get some challenge.

**Andrew:** Yeah, so far, you said that you're interested in Jason's class. Has that helped you to feel more interested in English? Do you like English?

**Student:** Yes, so I'll join your class after your presentation. I think Jason is more willing to use English and find some fun way in learning English. And just, he just want you to say it loudly or share your own idea with him.

**Andrew:** Yeah, it's great. How do you feel about ... because you have to take EC1011? Other students, they take EC1012. You have to take this course first and then next semester, you get to do the academic English course.

**Student:** It's refer to your DSE result, I think. Our group is about two to three in my class and the other class is four or above, I think. It's different. English level is more ... It's a better way, too. We just follow.

**Andrew:** You don't mind being put into a class?

**Student:** I don't mind because my English is bad so I just learn some basics first and go more ... get more advanced then join next group.

**Andrew:** Yeah, okay. Why do you want to enhance your English? Why do you want to work on your English?

**Student:** First, I, the communication is important. For example, when we go travel, English is a common language in the world so we want to get more err common with the local people. They understand English but I sometimes I can't just understand, so I actually want to get more communication with the local people in English.

**Andrew:** Interesting. It's more about your future life or that you want to travel in the future?

**Student:** Yes, but also in university is used in English so learning English is a best way to get more improve on my other subject used in English.

**Andrew:** Do you think the students who scored like DSE5, do you think they have an advantage at university?

**Student:** It's true I think because they know many vocabulary and they have a good listening skill to their lecturers. Though they may just listen one time, they can understand the lecturer say but I need to do some revisions and search some difficult words to know the meaning so I thought they have less time to learn in English.

**Andrew:** How do you learn like how do you want to enhance your English? What do you think is the best way. You've got four years at university, what do you think is the best thing that you can do so that when you graduate you're confident and you can go into the workplace?

**Student:** I think it's more easy to learn English through communication with others and just have more practical ability to chat with other and speak more. I think speak is the best way to learn.

**Andrew:** Yeah. I agree. I think that using English in natural situations, conversations or situations because err you've already got a really good base in English vocabulary and grammar and stuff. I guess you need to practice and use it. That's the thing.

**Student:** Just some of the students may good at this reading and writing part but they just not very confident in speaking.

**Andrew:** Yeah, yeah, that's the thing. The same way because I'm learning Japanese and I listen a lot and I know all the grammar and stuff but speaking it is not, not many opportunities. That's how I want to develop my Japanese as well. So what about academic English, especially next semester you're going to study an academic English course. Do you think that's important for year 1 students?

**Student:** Err, I think it's very important because some of, after semester 1 we need to do the assignment in essays so we can use the pattern or words in their essays.

**Andrew:** Do you think English is important for you, for your future career?

**Student:** It's definitely right because maybe some time we need to meet the client that speak in English when I speak English not very well. We cannot have a common, common

ways on the projects. It's very important for me to learn English to get different communication.

**Andrew:** What's, what's your main motivation because you joined this scheme and you seem quite motivated to develop your English, so where is that motivation coming from?

**Student:** Because I got the time in Wednesday, so I got four hours between the first lesson and ... So I would like to try some class to get improve my skill, whatever the skill is for. I get some improvement on myself.

**Andrew:** Okay, that's great. Do you feel like any pressure from Hong Kong society, do you feel pressure to become an expert English speaker?

**Student:** I don't really understand what -

**Andrew:** - Yeah, so do you think in Hong Kong society, do you think, like, English is important?

**Student:** English? It's also important because they, some of them when they send me to a company they have many contracts. They all just write in English and, some email the form where you need to write in English, too.

**Andrew:** Yeah, it's true. So just the last question. If you think of yourself in five to 10 years then, what do you think you will be doing in five to 10 years time?

**Student:** I think is refer to my subject is building management, some of them, so it's management of people in doing the project.

**Andrew:** Yeah, do you think you will be living in Hong Kong, or would you like to go to other places as well?

**Student:** Nowadays, I prefer to go to other country too if I have the chance and the money.

[...]

**Andrew:** Yeah, yeah, I can understand that. OK, well, thank you very much.

**Student:** Thank you.