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The Troubled Sense of Otherness among Christian and Non-Christian ESL Freshmen at a Christian College in the Midwest

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Abstract

This study was derived from an ethnographic study conducted with five ESL learners and their peers in a Christian college in the Midwest. The theoretical framework of this article was built upon Freire's (2000) and Kumashiro's (2001) anti-oppressive education. The study employed various data sources to find out how Christian and non-Christian ESL freshmen experienced a sense of otherness in the local college community. The findings reveal the hidden norms in the faith-based college, which marginalized the non-Christian ESL freshmen from being legitimate participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The researcher provides recommendations to educators and administrators in higher education for advising international students and providing services to them. The researcher also highlights the importance of having a deeper understanding of the plights experienced by non-Christian ESL freshmen at Christian colleges in the USA.

Introduction

In the area of Christian English language teaching, many researchers have criticized churches and religious institutions for using English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes to preach the gospel and thus argued for a clear boundary between ESL education and preaching (Edge, 2003; Varghese & Johnston, 2007). Others agree that language-focused and missionary-focused teaching are dialogically intertwined and mutually reinforce each other (Baurain, 2007; Bruner, 1996; Pennycook & Makoni, 2005; Purgason, 2004).

Language is culture, as manifested by Agar's (1995) notion of "languaculture." "All teachers convey their values to students, and many have agendas both conscious and unconscious" (Purgason, 2004, p. 711). Any teaching mediated through language is predicated upon values and ideologies held by the teacher, whether the message is implicitly or explicitly conveyed. The boundaries between ESL teaching and preaching are often blurred and

unmarked, which make it challenging to delineate what counts as knowledge, learning, and legitimate participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Therefore, it is essential for researchers in the field to unpack the value-laden identity such as Christian and non-Christian, because such identities reflect and refract (Voloshinov, 1986) the oppression experienced by participants.

ESL freshmen, also known as international or nonresident aliens, face many challenges as newcomers, such as adjusting to the local cultural practices as "non-believers, international aliens, and student of color." During my 2009-2010 year of teaching at a Christian four-year college in the Midwest, I observed that ESL students were facing challenges at multiple levels while striving to become legitimate participants in the local communities. I started to write field notes and journals about their struggles as "outsiders" and I drew data from my research project, which was a five-month ethnographic study about how first-year ESL students learn through out-of-class situations, to answer three a posteriori questions in this article: (1) What were the local communities that ESL learners engaged in within the research site? (2) What were the binary biases (insider or outsider, native or foreign, Christian or non-Christian) experienced by the ESL learners in these local communities? (3) How did the ESL learners react to such biases and stereotypes? This article aims to provide an emic (i.e., insider) perspective about how the ESL freshmen socially negotiated for chances to legitimize their unique identity as international Christian and non-Christian ESL freshmen inside and outside the Christian college.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study was built upon anti-oppressive education (Freire, 2000; Kumashiro, 2001). Freire argued for a critical dialogism in which the students could construct dialogues with authorities and privileged groups

using their mother tongues and their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991).

Dialogue is thus an existential necessity. And since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's 'depositing' ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be 'consumed' by the discussants. (Freire, 2000, p.89)

Freire's work sheds light on the reappropriation of the cultural practices of the suppressed. Within this article, the suppressed refers to the non-Christian first year ESL students in the Christian college because the native, English-speaking Christians were the mainstream. Freire's critical dialogism echoes with Kumashiro's (2001) framework of anti-oppressive education:

Anti-oppressive movements often operate within a binary logic. When these movements challenge (one) oppression by claiming the (singular) marginalized identity, they reinforce the binaries of us/them, oppressor/oppressed, mainstream/margin. This process of galvanizing around the (one) marginalized identity—a process called "identity politics." (p. 5)

Kumashiro (2001) discussed the "identity politics" for the marginalized students of color in his article. In my study, non-Christian ESL students were the marginalized community who faced the binary biases on a daily basis. Being "other" does not necessarily imply marginalization. It is the lived experiences of being associated with undesirable identities that signifies marginalization.

In the area of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), some studies identified non-native speakers as appearing to be "schizophrenic" (Medgyes, 1983) and some revealed that they were unconfident (Braine, 1999; Llorca & Huguet, 2003; Tang, 1997). Medgyes (1983) claimed that non-native speaking teachers were "schizophrenic" because they felt unsafe about their language use and they could be aggressive and pessimistic at the same time (p. 3). Non-native speaking students faced similar plights of feeling

uncertain about the language, culture, and identity challenges they experienced on a daily basis. Being non-native and non-Christian can make the ESL learners attending a Christian college uncomfortable about their positioning among the mainstream. They feel disenfranchised due to their socially constructed identity as non-native and non-Christian. As a non-native educator, I shared similar concerns, which motivated me to delve into this topic. Non-native and non-Christian international students who attend a Christian college are under-researched, and I hope to raise awareness in the field and make their voices heard.

In the United States, ESL students are often labeled as deficient learners because of limited English proficiency or "negative identities" (Bashir-Ali, 2006; Clark, 2003; Hsieh, 2005; Kubota, 2001). Though some of them are treated well by open-minded and friendly peers, "many are targeted as victims of ridicule because of their 'funny accents,' their low level of English proficiency, and their dress" (Bashir-Ali, 2006). Such phenomenon can be explained because: (a) ESL students are required to take ESL classes, which are regarded by their peers as sub-standard because native speaking students are not required to take those for the completion of their degrees; (b) ESL students are newcomers to the United States and therefore do not have the cultural knowledge which is shared by their native speaking counterparts; and (c) many ESL students' skin-color, accents, non-verbal communication habits, and ways of dressing constantly remind others that they are foreigners and outsiders. The non-Christian ESL students living in a Christian community face more challenges than their Christian counterparts because many do not share the religious norm with others. It is therefore critical for their voices to be heard. Little is known about how non-Christian ESL students at the college level cope with the cultural norms in the mainstream community of a Christian college environment. This study aims at filling such a research gap.

Literature Review

In the early 21st century, some researchers (Edge, 2003; Varghese & Johnston, 2007) reported Christian educators as being unethical in using ESL or EFL courses as a means to preach the gospel. Heated debates and controversies were recorded in the field of Christian English teaching, particularly regarding the purpose of teaching English overseas.

Earl Stevick criticized teachers who had a “covert purpose of exporting their moral and/or religious certainties to the rest of the world” (cited in Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003, p. 338; Baurain, 2007, p. 204). Many scholars urged Christian educators to clearly state their goals of teaching without disguising their intention to preach (Edge, 2003; Varghese & Johnston, 2007). Researchers then started teasing out the complexities involved in Christian English language teaching, with the consensus that teaching and preaching could be dialogically intertwined and mutually reinforce each other (Baurain, 2007; Bruner, 1996; Pennycook & Makoni, 2005; Purgason, 2004).

Bruner (1996) underscored that “pedagogy is never innocent. It is a medium that carries its own message” (p. 63). Teaching often involves the unconscious preaching of moralities and religious beliefs (Bechwith & Koukl, 1998). It is unfair to formulate a sweeping statement to imply that all ESL institutions, churches, and instructors are unethical when they hold certain religious beliefs. It is therefore advisable for the instructors and institutions to clearly state their expectation, especially regarding their intention to preach the gospel or convert non-believers.

Many scholars agree that language education and religion are inseparable (Pennycook & Makoni, 2005; Spolsky, 2003). In 2007, Varghese and Johnston published an article that reiterated the importance of putting “religion” back into the TESOL community. Varghese and Johnston (2007) underscored that “religion has been largely overlooked as a critical factor in the evolution, spread, and institutionalization of languages” (p. 8) and thus it was important to study the effect of religion in English language education. As such, these scholars agreed that religion and English education were discursively intertwined and inseparable in theory and practice.

In 2009, Smith wrote about how Christian educators viewed learners as spiritual beings and concluded that language learning combined the processes of “ethics, hospitality, failure, the nature of the good life, questions of value and the source of hope, responses to human need, cross-generational interaction” (p. 10). This article responds to Smith’s proposition by unpacking the complexities involved in ESL students’ positioning of themselves in a

local Christian college community. It also recommends new ways to help these students participate as legitimate members of the community.

Methods

The logic-of-inquiry of this study was primarily informed by New Literacy Studies (Street, 1993, 1995) and ethnographic studies (Spradley, 1979). New Literacy Studies (Street, 1984, 1993, 2003) demonstrated how the traditional sense of literacy has been broadened to include oracy (Street, 1993), demonstrated social practice in cross-cultural perspective (Gee & Green, 1998), and displayed how ideologies are situated within cultural and political structures and contexts (Street, 1993). As such, it is a meaningful framework to explore how international ESL students negotiate for the right to reappropriate their own identities in local communities through everyday interactions with others.

This study’s research design was also based on Spradley’s (1979) “hourglass” design of an ethnographic study. Spradley suggested three steps: First, the ethnographer begins with a grand tour to get an overall idea of the researched; second, he or she selects domains for in-depth analysis; third, he or she explores the cultural themes by identifying the relationships between the results from detailed analysis and the overall picture.

The reason that I chose this research design was because Spradley’s hourglass design served as a systematic tool for organizing a vast amount of data. The grand tour helped me record and present preliminary findings about what was going on at the research site. The in-depth analysis allowed me to select cases that were of interest for further investigation. The last step regarding cultural themes helped me identify patterns that emerged from the data.

I was the researcher and an ESL instructor for these students at the time of data collection. My teaching position at the college helped me gain access to the research site and my dual role as the teacher-researcher allowed me an emic perspective about the lived experiences of the participants. I was baptized in Hong Kong in 2004, and I personally embraced the mission to teach with the spirit of Jesus. As a non-native English speaker teaching at the research site, I shared the same plight with the

ESL learners, e.g., being identified as foreign and a person of color. As such, my analysis could be biased due to my heightened sensitivity about the negative feelings that the ESL freshmen felt at the research site. This is one of the limitations of the study.

The findings of this article were drawn from a large-scale ethnographic study. The data collection and analysis of this study can be characterized as qualitative inquiry. The corpus of data included field notes, interviews, and diaries written by the participants, artifacts collected from the participants, and participant observations, which included audio and video recordings of the participants' social interactions apart from class time. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) open coding and Strauss and Corbin's (1998) axial coding were applied to the collected data in the data analysis. Domain specific keywords that were repeatedly found in the data corpus were identified. These keywords were grouped to become the themes that emerged from the data.

Findings and Discussion

Contextual Information. The research site was a four-year private Christian college located in a rural area in the Midwest of the United States, and over 90% of the students in the college were White. So the ESL students had fewer chances to speak in their mother tongues when compared to those in urban colleges. Because of the geographical location of the college, most students were from neighboring farms and ranches in the Midwest. The

small-scale of the research site limit the findings' transferability.

The ESL students who participated in this study were from different countries and the International Office identified them through placement tests conducted in fall. These students were required to take ESL classes before taking regular major and minor classes at the college.

The key participants in this study were five ESL learners, but the study also includes data from the native-English speaking peers of these ESL learners. The native speaking peers were the dorm mates and friends of the ESL learners and were the students at the college with various majors and seniority. In this study, two native speaking peers are mentioned: Catherine and Kate. Catherine and Kate were close friends of all five of the ESL learners and they both had more exposure to international students than other native speaking peers in the Christian college because of their friendship with ESL learners. All names are pseudonyms in order to protect identities.

Regarding the ESL learners who were primary participants in this study, two were from China, two from Japan, and one from Honduras. The 22 native speaking peers were students ranging from freshmen to senior at the college. Among the five participants, Jack and Lei (from China), and Makiyo (from Japan) were non-Christians, whereas Aiko (from Japan) and May (from Honduras) were Christians. This information is included in Table 1.

Table 1: Background Information about the Five ESL Freshmen

	Home Country	Mother Tongue	Majors	Religious Background
Jack	Guangxi, China	Chinese	Art and Graphic Design	Atheist
Lei	Beijing, China	Chinese	Film Studies	Atheist
May	Honduras	Spanish	Spanish	Christian
Aiko	Japan	Japanese	Business Administration	Christian
Makiyo	Japan	Japanese	English Literature	Buddhist

The private Christian college only hired Christian professors and staff but had an open policy that admitted non-Christian students to all of its academic programs. Upon receiving official admission to the college, all ESL students signed an agreement to conform to the Christian practices such as attending the chapel service every week. They were also informed prior to enrolling that the teaching offered by the college incorporated Christian faith and values. The international office of the College organized some activities to help international students feel accepted. These activities included meeting with native speaking students for conversation practice, Chinese New Year celebration, and an annual international fun fair. Participants reported that these activities were very helpful to make them feel validated and appreciated.

The Local Communities that ESL Learners Engaged in the Research Site. Applying Spradley's (1979) domain analysis, three major domains were identified in the data corpus, i.e., domain of actors, places, and activities. These domains and the sub-domains within them corresponded to the question about the kinds of local communities that ESL learners engaged in. I found that the domains could be categorized as either academically related, dormitory related, or community related. For heuristic purposes, the domains are summarized in the following table. The ESL participants in the study all resided in the single-sex dormitories assigned by the international office, which became one of the key domains in which students engaged.

Table 2: Domains of actors, places, and activities

	Academic	Dormitory	Local Community
Actors	Professors, classmates, tutors	Dorm-mates, wing mates, floor mates, roommates	Restaurant workers, store keepers, townspeople
Places	Student activity hall, Chapel, cafeteria, classrooms, administrative offices	Dormitory rooms, lounge, TV room, computer room, game room, laundry room, kitchen, restroom, shower room	Municipal parks, restaurants, entertainment facilities, grocery stores, shops
Activities	Singing contest, choir performance, orchestra performance, ethnic fair	Dance party, cardboard fighting tournament, fraternity and sorority camps	Shopping, social gathering, lunch and dinner parties

ESL Bible and Chapel Service. The aforementioned three major categories of academic, dormitory, and local community encompassed various hidden cultural norms that were specific to the Christian identity of the college. The ESL learners had the freedom to choose to participate in out-of-class activities. However, academically, all ESL classes were taught with Christian values because the college required all instructors to incorporate Christian worldviews in their teaching. ESL Bible was one of the required courses for all ESL students. Among the five ESL participants, the two non-Christian students from China, Jack and Lei, were the most concerned about taking ESL Bible (Lee, 2011). They said that they did not know that ESL Bible was a required course and they could not understand the need to take such course. The program did specify the inclusion of ESL Bible in the curriculum but many international students overlooked this requirement or they thought that they could negotiate for a substitute class once they arrived. As Jack had an uncle who was also a Christian, he was interested in knowing more about it and so he stayed in the course. However, Lei dropped the ESL Bible course because she was not interested in knowing more about Christian values. Besides the ESL Bible, the college required all first-year students to attend the chapel on a weekly basis. The chapel service usually involved an invited talk or performance from other Christian communities. Each chapel service required the students to record their attendance. If the students did not accumulate enough chapel credits by the end of the year, then they would not be able to move on to the next year of studies and would incur penalties.

The ESL Bible course and the chapel service requirements represented the institutional efforts to

preach a Christian worldview to all students. There was no explicit intention to convert non-believers to believers but Christian worldview was evident. For the Christian students, studying the Bible and attending chapel services was more easily accepted as a requirement than it was for the non-Christian students.

Binary Biases Experienced by the ESL Learners in the Local Communities. Some binary biases identified in the research site revealed the dualistic frames that were normalized in the local communities in which these students participated. These biases involved the heuristic judgments of good or evil, strong or weak, true or false, etc. With reference to Lakoff (2004), “Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions” (p. xv). At the research site, the most common binary categories were: insider or outsider, native or foreign, and Christian or non-Christian. Inherent biases often put the non-Christian ESL freshmen into the outsider, foreign, and non-Christian categories, which were undesirable identities for the participants because they lacked the shared norms with native speaking Christian students.

Over 90% of the local residents in the college town were of European descent. The participant ESL freshmen looked different due to their skin and hair colors, sounded different due to their accents, and acted differently due to their own cultural practices, easily identifying them as “foreigners.” This troubled sense of otherness was obvious to them, especially when they were regularly asked questions such as, “Where are you from?” or “Why do you want to study in the USA?” and “Are you

Christian?” These questions were raised in classrooms, dormitories, gym, cafeteria, library, park, grocery stores, and anywhere they went. From the local people’s perspective, asking those questions indicated their interest in knowing these foreigners. However, the ESL learners felt a strong sense of otherness when these questions followed them wherever they went. Telling strangers that they were from China, Japan, or Honduras and they were non-Christian (except for May and Aiko) made them feel uncomfortable.

A question such as “Where are you from?” was a euphemism because it implied that they were foreign; a question such as “Why do you want to study in the USA?” implied that they could have made a wrong decision to leave their home countries to come to the USA; a question such as “Are you Christian?” implied a yes or no answer, which signified an in-group or out-group identity. Jack said that the first month that he arrived in the dormitory, there were a couple of dorm mates who explicitly mentioned that they did not like Chinese boys. Makiyo also mentioned that sometimes her dorm mates would ignore her because they did not have much in common.

During the international fair, Lei said to me that she preferred questions that began with “how?” If people asked her how she felt about studying in the college, then she would feel that they genuinely cared about her and she would not have a strong sense of otherness. Lei also said that what disturbed her the most was the Western eye gaze. Lei said that most of the local students were monolingual with no international exposure. They stared at Lei because she was one of the few East Asian female students on campus. Lei’s experience of otherness was exemplified when she volunteered to perform a song at a joint school singing contest. She carefully chose an English song called “Just One Last Dance” because she wanted her song to be received well by the American students, who cast votes to decide who the winner was. Lei took private singing classes in Beijing for several years. She believed that she performed well on stage and she deserved the championship. However, she lost the competition. Here is part of a journal entry submitted by Lei. In the journal she recorded some of the conversations that she carried out with her friends at the college.

Catherine: Hey honey, how are you?

Lei: Not so good... not so good.

Catherine: What’s wrong?

Lei: You know, I’m just sad. Nobody voted for me. They didn’t vote for me because I’m Chinese.

Catherine: You know, with American students, they don’t usually vote for the best. They vote for their friends. Most people don’t know you. You did a really good job, and you’re loved. Don’t feel bad.

Lei: No, Catherine, I know you’re just trying to make me feel better. I mean, you’re different. You get us. Most people just don’t. They don’t like me. I wish more people were like you. But I just feel so bad, I can’t make them like me. I just...

Lei felt deeply neglected due to her Chinese identity. She felt that her Chinese identity was not valued in the local community. Makiyo felt similarly. The following is a transcription from participant observation that was recorded:

Makiyo: I don’t know. American people like discussions. During the lunchtime or just chatting, they always discuss something. They all have their opinions.

I can’t express my feeling in English sometimes and so I don’t think anyone can understand me completely.

This transcript shows Makiyo’s frustration of wanting to be heard and understood; however, due to the “languacultural” barriers (Agar, 1995) (e.g., speaking speed, cultural references, and accent), Makiyo felt left out in the “American” discussions.

The challenges that ESL freshmen experienced were indeed multi-layered. On the one hand, they had to learn academic and informal speaking, writing, and texting skills. At the same time, they were feeling troubled due to their otherness identified by others and by themselves. During an informal interview, Aiko said that East Asian female students at the college were called “yellow cabs” because they were easy to get. Aiko felt hurt because of such negative label, which was widespread in the college. The following paragraphs discuss the Christian and non-Christian ESL freshmen’s reactions to these biases and

stereotypes, which put them at a vulnerable position at the college.

Reactions of ESL Learners Regarding such Biases and Stereotypes.

In the following paragraphs, I drew upon the participants' diaries, participant observations, and interview transcriptions to document how the ESL learners reacted to the biases and stereotypes that they experienced at the research site.

Christian ESL learners: May and Aiko. May was born in the USA and then sent back to Honduras until high school. She then returned to the USA to pursue her college degree. May was baptized in Honduras. Her whole family was Christian and she was used to going to church and reading the Bible before going to college. God and church always appeared in May's diaries and daily conversations.

Two of the culture shocks that I had when I first came were the language and the food. Everything was so different. I thought I was going to die. But thanks to God everything got better, so much better that I can say that I love living in the United States. Since I came here I have made a lot of friends; friends from high school, work, church and now friends from the College. (May's diary)

This excerpt suggests how May's Christian identity opened doors for her to gain access to the local community. Her best friend at the college, Kate, who was a native English-speaking Christian student, went to a Spanish-speaking church with May every week. Also, May's Christian identity gained her access to the Bible study group at the college where it provided her many opportunities to speak and write in English. Kate's interview response indicates how May had better connections with the local communities because of her Christian identity.

We generally like... (giving testimonies). I had to give a testimony, and every once a while we look at different Bible verses, and she would say I remember this passage that I read with my mom. A testimony in American doesn't necessary mean you go to Christ, it means you talk about your story in front of people. So we talk about passages and like the other day we were in Chapel and we saw a song and we talk about the verses and messages. (Interview with Kate)

May's Christian identity helped her to relate to Kate and other Christians at the college. Christian language and words such as *testimony*, *spirituality*, *love*, and *faith*, were not a problem for May.

Similarly, Aiko, who was a Christian baptized in Japan, easily gained access to the Christian choir and orchestra because she shared the same religious identity with others at the college.

Well I generally have the accent but now I think it's softer, more Americanized. Oh yeah. During the (Christian) choir there are things expected different, like there are nouns, which are required to be pronounced clearly, it could be very important. So that's a lot of learning. The songs were written in Latin, sometimes different things but yeah, and Dutch. And for me, I speak Japanese and we have very different five vowels. And for me the songs all sound the same, and I'm trying to pronounce the same. (Interview with Aiko)

Through participating in the choir and orchestra, Aiko learned pronunciations of many words and she felt more Americanized. Her religious background helped her gain access to learn English in out-of-class situations.

Non-Christian ESL Learners: Lei, Makiyo, and Jack. As compared to the Christian ESL freshmen (May and Aiko), Lei, Makiyo, and Jack did not have the same access and opportunities in their out-of-class learning processes. Because of a lack of the Christian background shared by the majority, Lei, Makiyo, and Jack had to actively look for opportunities to compensate for the lack of connections with others.

Lei did not connect well with her peers. Due to the constant anxiety of being looked down upon, the cultural shock, and the lack of shared religious interest with her peers, Lei chose to stay at her own dormitory room in her spare time. She did not make good friends at the college.

Makiyo was the only ESL freshman who had other religious belief before coming to the USA. Both Jack and Lei were atheists and they grew up in atheist families. Makiyo was Buddhist before coming to the USA. Makiyo studied at a two-year junior college in Japan, which had a relationship

with the Christian college in the Midwest, and it was for this reason that Makiyo chose to study in a Christian college. Makiyo was a mature student when she started to study English literature at the research site. She wanted to pursue a master's degree in library science upon graduation and her dream was to become a librarian.

Makiyo was perceived as a shy girl. She was very afraid of talking to her native English-speaking peers when she first arrived in the USA.

I can't understand everything, like if I talk one by one, I don't feel I am outsider. But if we talk in a class maybe 5 or 6 people. They talk talk talk and then I don't understand. And I feel scared. Even though I can listen to most of it. But it's so fast I don't interpret English to Japanese. But maybe because of the words which I don't know. So... it sounds different. (Interview with Makiyo)

Makiyo worked at the college library as a student assistant. By working at the circulation desk, she had to talk to the library patrons, and thus she had opportunities to engage in conversations in out-of-class situations. However, Makiyo mentioned to me many times that she felt like an outsider whenever there was a group of five or six people. Such incidents happened the most frequently during lunch and dinnertime. She felt left out because of the language barrier and the outspoken and opinionated personality of her peers.

Makiyo revealed one of the specific cultural shocks she experienced. In Japanese classrooms, the students were not allowed to speak freely and the teaching was more teacher-centered. Japanese students were trained to be silent in class. Also, female students were expected to be gentle and submissive. However, in America, the female students were more assertive because freedom of speech was encouraged, especially in college communities. With reference to Hsieh (2005), "Facing the triple disadvantages of being women, Asians, and international students in the United States, Asian female international students are held to Asian stereotypes, such as obedience, submissiveness, subservience, quietness and non assertiveness" (p. 37). Makiyo was standing at a crossroads because she was not used to being assertive in public, which created anxiety and a sense of guilt.

Both Lei and Makiyo's responses confirmed Hsieh's (2005) findings that female East Asian students felt overlooked due to perceived submissiveness, and therefore they needed extra counseling assistance and peers to empower (c.f. Lessard-Clouston's English for Empowerment, 2013) themselves in the socialization process.

In contrast, Jack was very proactive because he spent most of his spare time talking with his dorm mates. For example, his roommate, who was from Minnesota, had an X-box game console and they often talked about video games. Jack was able to relate to the American video games that his roommate talked about by referring to the video games that he played before in China. Jack developed his own strategy to connect with others, which connects with Bourdieu's (1991) cultural capital and Moll's (2001) funds of knowledge. He used his knowledge from China to engage in conversations with his peers, which compensated for his lack of knowledge about American culture.

When comparing the Christian ESL freshmen to the non-Christian freshmen, I found that the Christian ESL freshmen had more channels to connect with others by engaging in the same religious activities such as going to church, participating in Bible study group, and taking part in choir practices. These activities provided them with ample opportunities to talk and relate to their English-speaking peers. In contrast, the non-Christian ESL freshmen had to be more proactive in finding alternative ways to connect with others.

One of the education majors, Catherine, who was a Christian and a native English speaker, discussed and summarized the plights of non-Christian ESL learners from her point of view during an interview:

There are certain ways of thinking that you have to think, otherwise people will be a little bit freaked out... And plus it's Christian, and so there's, I don't agree with this, but this is a Christian community and it determines what the right way of thinking is and everybody has to think that... Say Chinese culture, it's difficult than Spanish culture 'cuz there is a small community of Spanish speaking people here. People just don't like Asia, they have different problem with Asian people directly. They don't really like Asian people that much. They are

just not exposed to them. They are strange and they seem very backward. Because the way you do things are so different, and we are just we are the right way. Like Asian people do not give eye contact, we perceive them as very cold. (Interview with Catherine)

Catherine's interview response confirmed my findings that ESL freshmen were perceived as outsiders. Especially because the college was a Christian community, according to Catherine, the majority community determined right ways of thinking and acting. Unfortunately, the ESL freshmen thought and acted differently and therefore were identified as "others." Catherine had been a cultural broker (Gay, 1993) for the five ESL learners since she knew them for a year. During the interview, Catherine tried to position herself as a friend to these ESL learners as if she could understand their plight. Catherine felt that she was an exception to the rule within the local community because according to her, the majority of the local community tended to have negative stereotypes about Asian people.

Implications of the Study

Based on the data analysis from the data corpus, I state the implications of the study in the following five points.

1. Though both Christian and non-Christian ESL freshmen shared the same "deficient learners" label due to language difference, Christian ESL freshmen had invisible privileges in a Christian college because they shared the same religious belief with the local community.
2. Christian ESL students gained more learning opportunities than their non-Christian counterparts by engaging in Bible study groups, church gatherings, testimony sharing, and friendship building in local churches.
3. Non-Christian ESL students signed a contract at the beginning of the school year to agree to various rules such as attending the Chapel service and observing the Christian moral values. But many of them signed the contract without actually understanding what it meant to be Christian. Often times, international students signed the contract because they needed to have a chance to get a college degree in the USA, and so they did not seriously

consider the consequence of agreeing to terms that could prove to be a delay of their graduation date.

4. The ESL learners and their native English speaking counterparts tended to treat Christians/Non-Christians/Americans/Chinese/Asian/Japanese as a homogenous group at the College, when in fact, there are many differences between a southern and northern Chinese, just as Americans in the south tend to be different from those in the north and vice versa.
5. More conversations between ESL students and native English-speaking students should be encouraged and the university administration should work on providing communicative platforms for them to identify their stereotypes and cultural assumptions about ESL students. What does it mean to be an ESL student? What does it mean to be American? What does it mean to be Christian and Non-Christian? We need to unpack these norms in order to help ESL learners realize that being the "other" is fine.

Conclusion

This study examined the biases that five ESL freshmen experienced at a Christian college in the Midwest. These biases and stereotypes were destructive towards the ESL freshmen's social participation. As a result, introverted non-Christian learners such as Lei and Makiyo experienced anxiety, which hindered their confidence to participate as legitimate learners in the college community. As a result, Lei and Makiyo lost many opportunities to connect with others in the social settings.

Non-Christian ESL learners were often marginalized because of a lack of shared cultural and religious background. Though there were non-Christian out-of-state students studying at the College, the level of peer acceptance was very different because these students shared similar cultural backgrounds and they usually had a better general understanding of Christianity.

With reference to the findings, the following recommendations for universities' international offices and administrators could help bridge the gap between the ESL freshmen and their peers. For one thing, monolingual Christian students should be

educated to appreciate the differences that these ESL students had. They should receive advice about how to ease the ESL students' social anxiety by showing more compassion and empathy. Specific guidelines and examples could be provided regarding how they should approach an international student and engage in conversations. They should learn to avoid asking questions that imply binary biases: Christian or non-Christian, native or foreign, insider or outsider, etc. ESL learners should also learn that being different was not a deficit. Their unique language and cultural resources are great assets to the local community, and there are various ways for them to contribute what they knew in their home countries to the local communities (Moll, 2001).

The findings also imply that the international office should consider providing more advising to ESL students before admission. It would be helpful to provide face-to-face or Skype advising session about the Chapel credit requirement. Many Christian colleges in the USA require the students to sign a contract about conforming to Christian beliefs, moral values, and religious practices, when in fact, these students might need face-to-face consultation sessions to understand what the contract means. Such a practice is often compromised due to the difficulty of communicating with international applicants. With new technological tool such as Skype, such practices are easier. Another suggestion is to send the international applicants an online course in their native language about the religious practices at the college they are considering. There has to be formal and informal assessment for finding out their understanding of the terms to which they agree. Their answers to the assessment questions ought to be evaluated before official admission.

In addition, counseling services regarding social acceptance should be provided to ESL freshmen. International students often feel the need to have counselors who speak their languages. It is critical for higher education institutions to hire international counselors who understand the plights of these ESL students. All in all, it is necessary to raise the overall cultural awareness about international students in Christian colleges. These are necessary steps to help ESL students feel more accepted and validated in their local communities.

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1. I am very grateful to God because He gave me an opportunity to become a Christian educator. Throughout the years, He molded me and used me in a way that I had never imagined before.
2. Throughout this study, I was aware of the researcher biases that I had because I was also a non-native foreigner at the site. On one hand, I had empathy towards the ESL students and I had a strong bonding with them. I was confident in presenting from an emic perspective. On the other hand, because of our shared non-native identity, I might have skewed towards the rights and benefits of non-Christian ESL learners. I hope the audience might read with discretion as a result of this.
3. I would like to thank all the participants in the study. Without their contributions, I would not be able to publish this article. All the names mentioned in this article were pseudonyms to protect participants' identities.
4. This article was not written to challenge the local practices at the research site. Rather, it was written as a descriptive study to help educators, researchers, and administrators understand more about how non-Christian ESL learners live their lives in a Christian community.
5. The international office of the research site made tremendous contributions towards the ESL students' learning. Many engaging events were held to help them become legitimate participants. I would like to acknowledge the great work of the international office of the college.
6. The term Christian was used in this article without specifying the denomination so as to protect the identity of the college. The readers should be aware that it is not a homogeneous term in the USA and there are many variations in terms of beliefs and practices across the denominations.

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