Exploring Academic Achievement of the International Students from Southeast Asia：
A Case Study from SUNY Albany

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Abstract：Researches on individuals' English language proficiency and its impacts on the academic achievement of the international students need to be taken into account. Based on a case study with mixed-method, this article conducted questionnaire survey and interview among the participants who are studying in SUNY Albany, a state university in the northeast of the U.S. The participants are international students who come from English outer circle and expanding circle countries of Southeast Asia. The findings show that there is significant correlation between age and length of learning English；there exists correlation between improving English language proficiency via language training course and it is beneficial to get scholarship；English language proficiency and academic achievement is not always clear；studying abroad in the U.S. does not necessarily lead to the improvement of the international students' second language acquisition；English language proficiency has correlation with one's future job and career development.

Keywords：case study；mixed-method approach；English language proficiency；academic achievement

1. Introduction

This current study attempts to explore the factors that impact the participants' academic achievement. The role of a case study with mixed-method approach is considered, with quantitative data analysis plus qualitative interview in this research. The seminal studies are the work of Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003), referred to case study as a type of research design and analysis most widely used approach to research in education, the relevant studies could be found in Nunan (1992), Merriam (1998), Norton (2000), Cho& Bridgeman (2012), Geide-Stevenson (2018), Neumann, Padden, and McDonough (2019), Yang, Helen and Farley (2019), Farley et al. (2019). Most of the previous case studies involving are conducted via the method of quantitative data analysis. This case study employed a mix-method approach with the participants in data analysis and interview conducted in March 2017 in SUNY Albany, data analysis on the close-ended questions in the questionnaires with

Likert 6 scales; then an in-depth interview with the participants were recorded and transcribed, with an attempt to mix the quantitative and qualitative methods, as the extant questionnaire consists of the questions, to substantiate mostly by the interview data, in exploring the factors impacting on the international students' academic achievement from Southeast Asian countries who study abroad in the U.S. According to Kirkpatrick's classification of English in the Southeast Asia (2010), 40% of the participants are from Outer Circle countries of Singapore, and 30% from the Philippines; 30% participants are from Expanding Circle countries, among them, 10% are from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia respectively. As for the researches on international students' intercultural communication, relevant studies could be found in Tomasz, Zofia et al. (2020), in Joy (2020), and in Nina (2020). As for the acculturation, relevant studies could be found in Berry (2005), Rachel & Nigar. (2011), Andre, Fons et al (2020), Isabel, Cecilio et al (2020). In the current research, we examine the factors affecting the academic achievement of international students in the American university sector, in an attempt to identify the relation between English language proficiency and individual students' academic achievement. We make a contribution to the field by applying mixed-method to analyze the data and understand both the positive and negative outcomes of studying abroad in a broader context, shed additional lights on international students' overseas experience.

2. Literature Review

It is generally accepted that Study Abroad (SA) provides a special opportunity of immersion in a target culture and a target language, which enable the second language learners to improve their language abilities and intercultural sensitivities. SA has thus far been investigated by scholars interested in foreign language education with a view to building a theory of SLA in immersion contexts. Bevis (2002) and Harrison (2002) hold that international students are not only a valuable financial asset to universities in developed countries, they are individuals who also enrich these countries with their diverse heritage and perspectives, thus, serving to increase cultural awareness and appreciation. Segalowitz & Freed (2004), Isabelli-García (2006), Martinsen (2010), Martinsen et al (2010) explored that openness to new cultures and willingness to communicate with them has been proven to be of great value to L2 acquisition leading to significant L2 gains during SA. Related to the studies involving intercultural competence and L2 acquisition in the context of study abroad programmes, Tomasz, Zofia et al. (2020) explain the role of intercultural competence in relation to other variables both linguistic (proficiency level, input and output opportunities) and non-linguistic (age, aptitude, motivation, willingness to communicate, and personality). Baker-Smemoe et al (2014) and Marijuan & Sanz (2018) suggest that intercultural competence is the strongest predictor of L2 gains during study abroad. Related to the studies of international students' acculturation, Berry (2005) defined that acculturation is the process of change that takes place as a result of two or more cultures coming into contact. Rachel & Nigar (2011) found that the international student literature provides support for some aspects of the acculturation models, and explored possible acculturative stressors encountered by international students and proposed intervention program to aid acculturation. Andre, Fons et al (2020) used a sequential exploratory mixed-method design in two studies to investigate acculturation of international students at an Australian university and test how these factors are related to psychological and sociocultural outcomes.

Related to the case studies involving could be found in Neumann, Padden, and McDonough (2019), which explores the relation betweenlanguage scores and the academic performance of undergraduate students during the

first year of study；Yang，Helen and Farley（2019）quantifies the impact of language on the performance of international accounting students from a cognitive load theory perspective；Farley et al.（2019）makes the comparison of Chinese and Western English language proficiency measures in transnational business degrees；Geide-Stevenson（2018）found that English proficiency positively impacts academic performance，but at a declining rate；Cho & Bridgeman（2012）studied the relationship of TOEFL scores to academic performance from American universities；Gu and Maley（2008）conducted a survey on Chinese students in the UK；Norton（2000）framed her study with multi-case study of five immigrant women's learning English in Canada（from Czechoslovakia，Peru，Poland，and Vietnam）. Related to English language proficiency measures，Farley et al.（2019）made an empirical comparison of Chinese and Western English language proficiency measures in transnational business degrees，Chinese national college English language program（CEP），a Western university´s English for academic purpose（EAP）language program，a standardized English language proficiency（SELP）test were comparatively analyzed as the measures；Madrazo and Bernardo（2012）revealed that extemporaneous speaking test and essay test were the two proficiency tests which were appropriate for college students in the Philippines.

Most prior studies reviewed on the participants' English language proficiency as a predictor of academic achievement in the primary first year of their study abroad which in turn limited the participants' interaction in English academic surroundings and therefore might have prevented them from immersing into English academic community. Thus more researches are needed to describe multiple cases of participants' performance in English as a medium of instruction environment during regular academic years. Moreover，participants' English language proficiency in English expanding circle countries of Southeast Asia，which in this study is classified as 'English traditionally played no internal role and was taught only as a foreign language'（Kachru，1986），remain under explored. In order to address the issues mentioned above，case study was designed to explore the undergraduates of different grades，and the participants of different majors from English expanding circle countries in Southeast Asia are included. In this study，besides iBT score，grade GPA is taken as English language proficiency measure to shed additional light on testing how well the participants' English language proficiency is.

3. Methods

3.1 Research objectives

The study involves the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. The questionnaires were collected from international students from Southeast Asia countries on（ⅰ）iBT（English language proficiency test for both undergraduate and postgraduate studies）；（ⅱ）Grade GPA（a measure of a student's academic achievement at a college or university，calculated by dividing the total number of grade points received by the total number attempted）；and（ⅲ）undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The micro-data from the questionnaires，using a Likert six-point scale（see Appendix Ⅰ），were designed to elicit participants' reactions to their academic life as a student in the university，and their ability to organize their study and life. To better understand their thoughts on English language proficiency and academic achievement，an in-depth interview was conducted with the participants，and then after transcription from the audio-recordings，the qualitative data was obtained. Open-ended questions（see Appendix Ⅱ）offered the participants' another opportunity to record more discursive and reflective comments on their opinions and choices. Questions with regard to participants' understanding of the relation between their English language level and their academic achievement were designed to test the influence of English

language on their adaptation to English speaking environment. Thus the mixed-method approach this case study applied yielded the results and provided both quantitative and qualitative basis for evaluation. In order to meet academic ethics, the participants' names are the pseudonyms. The questionnaires and the interviews were all given in English, to facilitate ease of expression; both the researcher and the assistant were ready for answering the participants' questions. To date, the questionnaires have been collected from the international students in an American university in the northeast of the States. The following in-depth interview included the same international students (including both undergraduate and postgraduate students). Two groups of students (divided by the English outer and expanding circle countries) from the questionnaire sample were analyzed and found they were different in English language proficiency (iBT, grade GPA), studying abroad experiences, learning motivations and attitudes etc.

3.2　English circle countries and iBT

Among the participants who joined in the survey, there are four international students from Singapore, three from the Philippines, which according to Kirkpatrick (2010), belong to the English Outer Circle countries where English is the second language (ESL), the national language, and the official language as well. There are international students from the English Expanding Countries, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, where English is the Foreign Language (EFL), and a subject which has been taught at school.
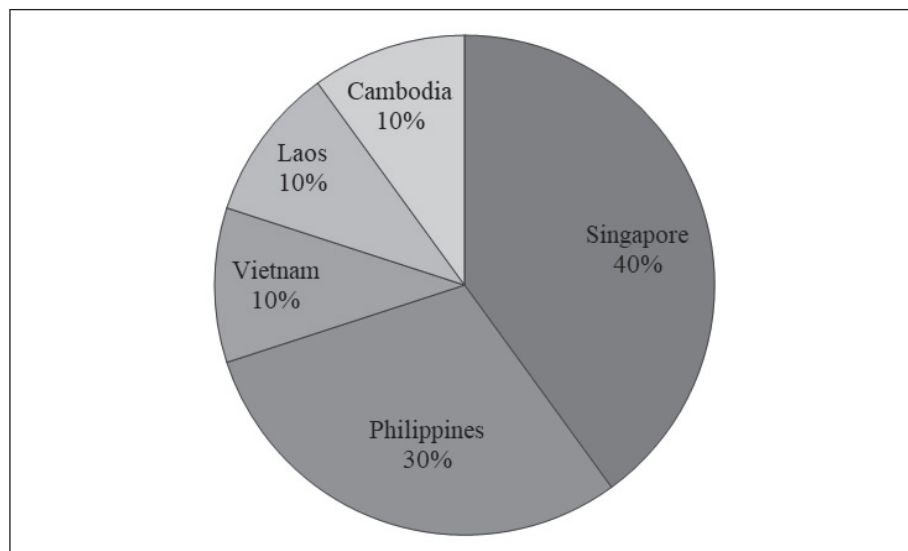

Figure1：*Countries where the participants are from*

Notes on Figure 1：Different part in this pie chart indicates the percentage of the

countries where international students are from in the survey.

Source：Own elaboration.

iBT is the internet-based TOEFL designed by ETS, the leading English-language test for study, immigration and work. TOEFL scores are accepted by more than 10,000 universities and other institutions in over 150 countries, and it's also the basic requirement of admission both for undergraduate and postgraduate in the university which I conducted this survey. When asked to identify their language pre-qualification before being international students, specifically their iBT scores, which considered to be the index of the participants' English proficiency level, and they said that they learned academic English training courses at least for 1 year. The following

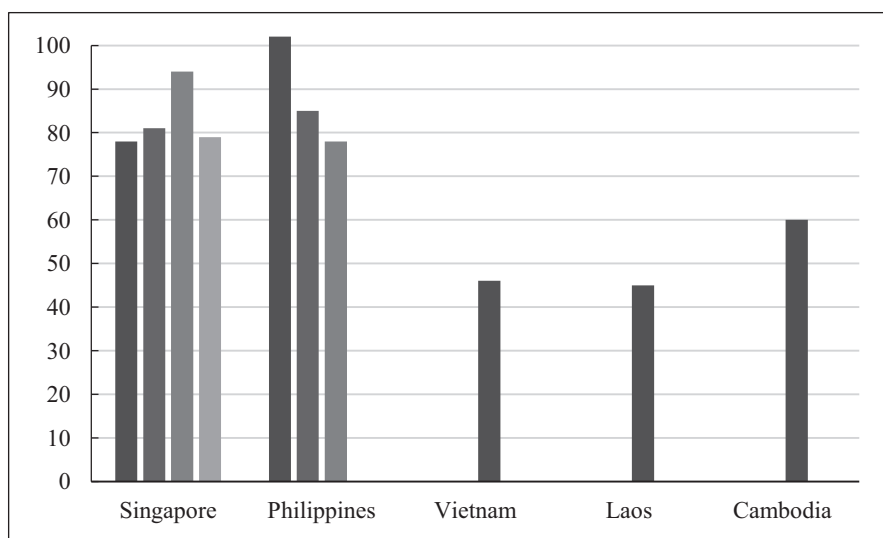Figure 2 is a bar graph indicating their iBT score before admission.

Figure2：*iBT scores of the participants from different countries in Southeast Asia*

Source：Own elaboration.

Figure 2 presents the relationship between the countries where the participants are from and the iBT scores they have provided in the admission. As it is clearly shown in this bar graph, the iBT scores of the four participants from Singapore are 78, 81, 94, 79 respectively; that of from the Philippines are 102, 85, 78 respectively; and the iBT scores of the participant from Vietnam is 46, from Laos is 45, and from Cambodia is 60. In other words, the iBT scores of the participants from English outer circle countries like Singapore and the Philippines are much higher than that of from English expanding circle countries like Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the former French colony in which English is a foreign language. Specifically, as indicated in Figure 2, the maximum of iBT scores of the participants is from the Philippines, as there are still sectors of Philippine society who advocate an English-only policy in education (Madrazo and Bernardo, 2012), although bilingual education policy has been implemented for four decades. The participants who are both Singapore and the Philippines got comparatively higher iBT scores, and the results can be interpreted as being consistent with the bilingual language policy that these two countries have applied for nearly half century.

3.3 Research questions

Accordingly, the following research questions guide this study：

1. Is there significant relation between age and time of studying English?

2. Could studying abroad improve the participants' English proficiency, thus help them to get scholarship?

3. Is the effect of English on academic performance correlated with the use of English in future career?

4. Is there significant relation between studying abroad in the US and improvement of one's English language level?

5. What's the relation between English language proficiency and academic achievement?

3.4 Participants

The participants of the study are the international students who have studied at least over two years at different majors in the US, such as Communication Arts, Marketing Management, Psychology, International Audi-

ting, Business Management, Information Technology, International Studies, and Political Science. Analysis of questionnaire data reveals the relationship between English language proficiency and their academic achievement, and the impact of English on their future career. For the purpose of this study, according to Educational Testing Services (ETS), "English language proficiency" is a critical concept which has been defined as the by the ability of students to use the English language to make and communicate meaning in spoken and written contexts while completing their university studies, usually for the admissions cycle, most of the universities is accepting both the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), internet-Based TOEFL (iBT) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) as indicators of English-language proficiency. To ensure this requirement, participants were selected based on the period of time spent studying abroad in either English-speaking contexts, or contexts in which education was provided solely in English instruction. Given that all participants had spent at least 2 years abroad, the majority in English-speaking countries, or studying in the school where English is regarded as the medium of instruction (EMI), all participants were fully able to communicate in English and preferred speaking in English to the researcher (a professor at the university).

3.5 Mixed-method approach

In this section, methods (mixed method approach) and research instruments (questionnaire and interview) are displayed. This case study employed a mixed-method approach, with quantitative study method in analyzing data, and qualitative case study of interviewing the participants. Denzin and Lincoln (2005a:4) holds that "qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials, case study; personal experience; introspection and interviews…". During the sampling procedures, Dornyei and Taguchi (2013) defined the sample is "the group of people whom researchers actually examine and the population is the group of people whom the survey is about". That is to say, the target populations of a study consist of all the people to whom the survey's findings are to be applied or generalized. In this case study, in order to select a truly representative sample, the effective method is to combine stratified random sampling with convenience sampling. On the one hand, the population is the international students from Southeast Asia who have studied abroad in SUNY Albany, and the actual sample involved two groups according to the classification of English concentric circles (Kachru, 1986), that is, English outer circle and expanding circle countries. And a random sample of a proportionate size was selected from each group to take part in this survey, as "random sampling is based entirely on chance rather than on any extraneous or subjective factors" (Dornyei & Taguchi, 2013:61). On the other hand, due to the criterion of convenience, sample selection in this study took accessibility and availability into consideration, as there was a routine weekly activity held in the Southeast Asian community.

In accordance with the study design, a simple questionnaire consisting of the closed-answer questions were emailed to the participants, accompanied by an interview afterwards. Although strictly lacking statistical validity, the completed questionnaires received in return not only provide the first feedback concerning the subject of the study, but also offer some fundamental indications concerning the approach of the project as a whole that will help to refine the orientation of its next phase---the in-depth interview. With an attempt to fill gaps and provide a detailed examination the relation between the English language proficiency and academic achievement, and its impacts on the participants' future career and development, mainly focused on English users from the Outer circle countries and the Expanding circle countries in the English as a native language (ENL) context. The results of this case study will be used only for research purpose; they do not have to write their name on it, their personal opinion and sincere answer are highly appreciated.

3.6 Data collection

As Mackey and Gass（2005）said that data collection often includes a number of instruments and techniques, such as interview（for enquiring）and questionnaires（especially for surveying a group from whom cases are selected）. Data collection decisions depend on what the researcher plans to do with the data. To elucidatethe relation between English language proficiency and academic achievement, the standards of English language proficiency classified by the school of English Studies of the University of Nottingham, UK（Dornyei & Taguchi, 2013）, is applied in the 6 levels of rating one's overall proficiency in English. In this case study, data collection involved two instruments: a close-ended questionnaire with Likert 6 rating scales and an in-depth interview afterwards. Since Yin（2003a:87）holds that applying multiple sources of data ensures the researchers to "corroborate and augment evidence from other sources". Sequentially, participants were provided with the questionnaire and were asked to make their choices on each item from the 6 scales, which present how much the participants agree or disagree the statements by simply circling a number from 1-6, and do not leave out any items. Example is the on the following.

Strong Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

（Example）If you strongly agree with the following statement, write this: 1　2　3　4　5　6

Table 1: Data Collection

	Age	Time of studying English	Studying abroad could lmprove my English language proficiency	English language proficiency is needed when study abroad	Impact on academic achievement	Language training courses improve English language proficiency	Helpful in getting scholarship	Difficult to learn English	How much my future work depends on English	iBT
Age	1									
Time of Studying English	0.841**	1								
Studying abroad could improve my English language proficiency	−0.053	−0.174	1							
English language proficiency is needed when studying abroad	0.189	−0.085	0.582	1						
Impact on academic achievement	−0.017	−0.057	0.145	0.429	1					

	Age	Time of studying English	Studying abroad could lmprove my English language proficiency	English language proficiency is needed when study abroad	Impact on academic achievement	Language training courses improve English language proficiency	Helpful in getting scholarship	Difficult to learn English	How much my future work depends on English	iBT
Language training courses improve English language proficiency	−0.177	−0.179	0.667*	0.327	0.491	1				
Helpful in getting scholarship	0.129	0.292	0.748*	0.535	−0.089	0.102	1			
Dimcultto learn English	0.305	0.420	−0.430	−0.563	−0.845**	−0.645*	−0.264	1		
How much my future work depends on English	0.034	−0.074	0.429	0.717*	0.842**	0.464	0.175	−0.738*	1	
iBT	−0.156	−0.132	0.152	0.260	0.688*	0.674*	−0.116	−0.697*	0.391	1

Notes on Table 1：

＊＊ denotes significant at the 1% level, indicates very significant correlation

＊ denotes significant at the 5% level, indicates significant correlation

Source：Own elaboration

Interview is another research instrument for data collection. Gillham（2008）holds that semi-structured interviews are conducted to accompany questionnaire results to gain a better understanding of what the numerical responses actually mean. Centering on the research questions, the appendix II with 10 open-ended questions is designed for interview, and the participants are required to answer the following questions with their point of views. The design for interview aims to make an inductive data analysis, together with the appendix I questionnaire for quantitative data analysis, to make a better understanding with the participants thoughts on the relevant research topic. The in-depth interview was conducted face-to-face, and recorded by the assistant researcher with mobile-phone, then transcribed afterwards.

4. Findings and Discussions

Mixed with quantitative data analysis of the close-ended questionnaire items with Likert 6 rating scales from Table 1, and inductive and interpretive analysis from the questions in the in-depth interview, this case study explores the English language proficiency in relation to the participants' academy and future career, and the findings show that：1. There is significant correlation between age and length of learning English. 2. There exists correlation between improving English language proficiency via language training course and it's beneficial to get scholarship. 3. The relation between English language proficiency and academic achievement is not always clear. 4. Studying abroad in the US does not necessarily lead to the improvement of English. 5. English proficiency has significant correlation with one's future job and career development. Among the relations observed in Table 2 and

the participants' responses to the questions in interview, this article stresses the relations with the detail analysis on the following points.

Firstly and foremost, from Table 1, it is clear that the quantitative dataanalysis shows that there is significant correlation between age and time of studying English, that is to say, for the participants in this case, the earlier age to study the English language, the longer time to study in the US, the higher level of their English proficiency is. Besides, in the in-depth interview, in response to the question "How long have you been studying English?", 70 percent of the respondents, all of who were from the English outer circle countries of Singapore and the Philippines, said that they have been learning English since 3 years old when they were in the kindergarten, therefore, when they study abroad in the American university as a freshman, it is at least 15 years that they have learned English; Furthermore, all of them judge their English language proficiency as "Upper Intermediate level and over" in the Nottingham standards, which described as the following:

Being able to converse about general matters of daily life and topics of one's speciality and grasp the gist of lectures and broadcasts, and be able to read high-level materials such as newspapers and write about personal ideas.

While 30 percent of the participants, who were from English expanding circle countries said that they started to learn English from junior middle school, they have learned English for six years before they studies abroad in the States. In response to the question "Are you satisfied with your English language proficiency? What degree of English language learning fluency do you hope to achieve? What can or will you do to attain this goal?" in the interview, the participant who is from Laos said he was in Intermediate level according to the standards of the University of Nottingham, which is described as "being able to converse about general matters of daily life, able to read general materials related to daily life write simple passages", although he has been in the States for 3 years, the first 2 years has been spent in the English language training courses that the university designed.

Secondly, evidence from the questionnaire survey supports that the participants' English language proficiency is helpful in getting scholarship, as among the positive choices, sixty-seven percent of the questionnaire respondents are "Strongly agree", thirty-three per cent are "Agree". This reflects the fact that the international students from Southeast Asia, especially the participants from Singapore and the Philippines, in which English is the official language, can fully use their human capital attributes, as English language is a key aspect of cultural capital proposed by Bourdieu (1986), which refers to the different forms of knowledge, values, language and meanings that individuals come to possess through their everyday living in specific social contexts (Swann et.al, 2004:68). With certain types of language being more highly valued than others, the English language is regarded as the most valuable capital in the language repertoire of the international students studying abroad in the US. Greater fluency in the English language is expected to enhance academic capacity in advance study abroad among international students. Moreover, the high level of the English proficiency ensures the international students to get high scores in the courses, and straight A helps them to be in a better position to obtain scholarship of all levels. In the interview, all the participants gave positive answers to the questions "In your personal opinion, is learning English important to your academic life? In what aspects?", besides, they gave their answers with mentioning about English and their grade GPA. Koh, a sophomore who was from Singapore, her response was typical, she conveyed her mind:

I believed that learning English well really does great help in getting higher scores in the required courses, since we study abroad in English－medium instruction university of the States, accordingly, high English language proficiency will lead to our higher grade GPA.

The respondents' answers are consistent with some other analyses such as the relevant research conducted by Neumann, Padden, and McDonough (2019), Geide－Stevenson (2018), who respectively found the correlation between language scores and the academic performance and found that English proficiency positively impacts academic achievement, but at a declining rate.

Thirdly, the results indicated that the relation between the participants' English language proficiency and their academic achievement is not always clear. This finding is inconsistent with the previous researches showing the correlations between English proficiency and academic performance in international students (Poyrazli, Arbona, Bullington, & Pisecco, 2001; Stoynoff, 1997; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Additionally, a qualitative study by Trice (2003) examining the perceptions of 27 academic staff (professors, department chairs, and deans) highlighted that staff members felt that English proficiency was the main challenge for international students, and stated that this could affect students' academic performance. The third finding of the study is also contrary to Geide－Stevenson´s (2018) data analysis which the results indicate that English proficiency affects academic performance; while it is consistent with some researchers' studies (Cho & Bridgeman 2012, Wait & Gressel 2009) which the results show there is no relation between the learners' English language proficiency and their academic achievement. However, it goes without saying that, more factors should be taken into account when it comes to the participants' academic achievement, in addition to their English language proficiency, such as the subjective factors like backgrounds and aspirations the participants, their sentiment motivation, learning attitude, the real relationship between peer students and the relationship between teachers and learners etc. According to Gu and Maley (2008:229):

Especially the influential factor of the cultural blinkers, which may screen out the importance of the individual personality of learners should not be ignored.

Besides, Gu and Schweisfurth (2006:54) hold that:

Factors such as the identities and motivations of the learners and the power relationships between them and their teachers were also significant issues in considering the relation between learners' English proficiency and their academic achievement.

Moreover,Geide－Stevenson (2018) argued that the type of achievement variable considered, thus highlighting a more nuanced result than expected. International students are required to provide their latest iBT score before the admission. There was a significant correlation between iBT score and the impact of English on academic achievement. And the degree of difficulty in English learning is significantly correlated with iBT score. That is to say, the higher iBT scores the participants have got, the higher level of their English language proficiency is, the higher scores they will attain in the course they have taken each semester. Take the course description of Linguistic Anthropology of a university in the Northeastern US as an example, the final score of the course depends on formative assessment, which requires large sum of academic reading, writing an essay with relevant theories,

and participating class discussion and presenting personal opinion and remarks on the certain topics, therefore, it is no doubt that English language proficiency is extremely necessary in the students' academic achievement.

Fourthly, the quantitative data analysis in Table 1 shows that studying abroad in the US does not necessarily lead to the improvement of one's English, which surpassed the initial conception or even reversed what we have expected. A common belief is that studying abroad in an English inner circle country like the US provides unparalleled opportunity of immersion in a target culture and a target language, thus it is generally accepted that the international students learners will end up with improved linguistic abilities. This finding is consistent with Tomasz, Zofia, Aleksandra et al. (2020) study which holds that:

> learners in formal instruction (FI), study abroad (SA), or immersion contexts display various linguistic outcomes which seem to be related to individual differences between them rather than the learning situation. It is those individual differences that should therefore be studied in relation to different L2 acquisition contexts. The picture of an average sojourner is not as clear as might be expected and further SLA research is needed to help us better understand the relationship between SA and L2 acquisition.

It is interesting in finding out which factors seem to lead to the irrelevance. In the following in-depth interview, the participants' responses to the questions varied. To answer the questions of "Why are you studying abroad in the US? Do you think studying abroad in the English inner circle country like the US could improve your English? What are your goals and how do you think English will help you achieve these goals?", six out of ten participants enunciated their point of view that studying abroad in the States does not necessarily mean that their English level will improve automatically, although facts that were self-evident are that international students whose native language is not English were completely immersing in English-speaking environment, as far as improvement of one's English language level is concerned, it depends on individuals' will, ambition, or one's vision and mission, and how much efforts they would spend on improving it. Anyhow, all the participants in this case agreed that overseas study did benefit greatly to their academic life, in this regard, much relevant to the research of Furnham (2004: 18) which holds that:

> ...for many students the overseas experience is enormously beneficial and can shape their outlook for the rest of their lives.

Ma, a Freshman who was from the Philippines, Tim and Tan, who were junior and senior fromSingapore, three participants from the English outer circle countries, their respondents in the interview also show the same thing, what they conveyed their points of view are the following marked with A, B, C:

> A. Studying abroad in the States was one of our most profound life experiences, leaving us very positively disposed.
>
> B. It is the first semester of my third year in this university, studying abroad in the US has broadened my horizon, especially when I gradually have adapted to the academic environment which critical thinking are more valued.
>
> C. I have been studied abroad in this American university for four years, my classmates are from different countries all over the world, it would be one of my academic resources, since I want to have advanced study

in Europe after graduation.

However, 40 percent of the respondents who were from the English expanding circle countries elucidated that they suffered from learning shock, which greatly prevented them from adapting to the new learning environment in the States, let alone improving their English level which was the basic need for academy. Nakang, a freshman who is from Cambodia, complained that:

My concern is to figure out what the teachers deliver in the class, but it is hard for me to follow them, as the teaching method and classroom activities were totally different from what I have experienced for more than ten years at home.

This is in the similar vein with Gu & Maley (2009) who believed that unpleasant feelings can be intensified thus impose a deeper strain on learners. Actually speaking, due to the insufficient language ability, maladjustment to the different teaching and learning model, traditional Asian value of not making public speech in order to avoid showing off may hinder the students from Southeast Asia to participate actively in the academic activities, specifically when the learners were exposed to English only surroundings. Thus, it does not necessarily mean that studying abroad in the US could improve of the participants' English, although they are not mutually exclusive, it depends on individuals; most of the participants agree that studying abroad benefit for their academic life though.

Last but not the least, Table 1 revealed that English language proficiency has significant correlation with one's future job and career development. As high English language proficiency helps to get information about job opportunities and earnings, and to transmit information about their skills to employers. The participants who aspire to get better jobs, progress at work, become more socially successful by achieving a high level proficiency in English; there are reasons to believe that language proficiency and schooling are complementary inputs of the earnings-generating process. Language skills are more likely to represent a valuable asset in occupations that require higher levels of formal education. This intuition is supported by the fact that returns to language knowledge tend to be higher in high-skill occupations (Berman et al. 2003). Moreover, schooling has a large impact on life opportunities, social mobility and labor market outcomes. Given that poor language skills are likely to hamper such opportunity; stronger effects from language proficiency among the highly educated may be expected. Therefore, the significance of English proficiency is obvious, fluent English as a working language provides the participants with better job opportunities. In response to the question "To what extent do you think your English language proficiency affects your future career and development?" in the interview, nine out of ten participants' answers could be summarized as "Very important", as the English language proficiency is regarded as one of the significant capitals in the labor market for human resources, international talents with high English language proficiency are dominant and promising in the post description, thus there is significant correlation with one's future job and career development. The only participant who holds that "It does not really matter whether my English is good or not, because after graduation I will be back Cambodia for family business". Moreover, exposure to American education model with active participation of seminar and classroom discussion are highly appreciated for years, such academic value as to the focus of teaching may well occur when the international students from Southeast Asian countries, especially those who were from English expanding circle countries like Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, have transcended from a culture where the educational tradition is textbook focused and teacher-

centered to a culture where the educational environment encourages students to independently explore their personal interests in learning, public speaking skills plus fluent spoken English, with different accents though, enable the international students to be self‑confident in expressing their minds in the public workplace, thus would qualify the potential talents in the international labor market and improve international competitiveness. It is consistent with Gu and Maley's (2008:236), which revealed that:

> Three key aspects of improvement could be found after surveying the academic adaptation and development of the Chinese learners in the UK: (1) improved linguistic competence; (2) increased self‑confidence and more involvement in class interaction; and (3) a stronger sense of independence in learning.

On the whole, both quantitative data analysis from the questionnaire and qualitative analysis from the interview in this casestudy, and the other previous studies conducted from different perspectives via different methods, has provided sufficient and positive responses in the relation between English language proficiency and the respondents' future career and development.

5. Conclusion

The current case study was undertaken precisely to verify the topic question that whether the participants' English language proficiency affects their academic achievement or not, and the results of the study support its negative answer to this question. The results can be interpreted as being consistent with some previous studies relevant. With statistical procedures and in‑depth interview, this case study applies the mixed methods which enable us to study the intricate correlation of the variables conducted. Based on the data collected from the questionnaires and interview questions, much attention has been paid on exploring the four research questions at the very beginning of the research design. As indicated in the results and discussions, the answers to the research questions have been shown. In the research design, what we assume that the English language proficiency may benefit for studying abroad in Inner Circle country of the U.S., while suspecting that a lack of academic qualifications may greatly hamper the academic attainment of the international students have both greatly motivated the study.

But it is regrettable that I was unable to document the participants' longer‑term trajectory as the international students of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL), because the study, was not long enough to do so, as I stayed in the States as a senior visiting scholar only for two years. Given that there are currently a few studies on the relation between participants' English language proficiency and their academic achievement, it is important to conduct this case study that explores the processes in an EMI university of the US, which provides a very rich context within which such explorations can be undertaken as international students are from both English outer circle countries and English expanding circle countries in Southeast Asia. In any case, with its limitations notwithstanding, this case study contributes a small step towards better understanding the theory and practice of English language proficiency and academic achievement of the international students studying abroad in the US. However, more linguistic and non‑linguistic variables such as input and output opportunities, proficiency level, acculturation and intercultural competence should be covered to explore this topic, complete assessment of the relevant study should involve more participants in the mixed‑method case study. Further research has been conducting with the international students from Southeast Asia who study abroad in the EMI universities in Southern China, with the perspectives of adaptation approach, the biographical approach,

and the motivation approach.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire for data analysis

Dear international students, we would like to ask you to help us by participating in this survey, to better understand your thoughts on English language proficiency and academic attainment as an international student in the U. S. Respondents are assure of the anonymity, so you do not have to write your name on it; and the information you provide will be used solely for this research, your personal opinion and sincere answer are highly appreciated. Thank you very much for your help.

Part I: Please provide the following information by ticking in the box or writing your response in the space so that we can have a better understanding about the participants.

1. Male　　Female

2. Nationality:_____

3. You are from: English Outer Circle country　　English Expanding Country

4. Your age:_____

5. Have you spent a longer period (at least 3 months) in English-speaking countries (traveling or studying)?

a. Yes　　b. No

6. What's your grade?

a. Freshman   b. Sophomore   c. Junior   d. Senior

7. What's your academic discipline?

a.Business   b. Education   c. Engineering   d. Medicine   e. Science

f. Anthropology   g. History   h. Sociology   i. Media and Mass Communications

j. Law   k. the others

8. How long have you been here for an international student?

a.Approximately one year   b. Less than one year   c. More than one year

9. Please identify your language pre-qualification before being an international student?

a. _____Years of English Language Training

b. English Proficiency Certificate: iBTor IELTS

c. Test Score of iBT / IELTS_____

10. Are you majoring in English in the university of the US?

a. Yes   b.No

11. Please rate your current overall proficiency in English by ticking one.

a. Upper intermediate level and over

b. Intermediate level Lower intermediate level

c. Post-beginner level

d. Beginner level

Part II. In the following 10 questions, please tell us how much you agree or disagree the statements by simply circling a number from 1-6, and do not leave out any items.

Strong Disagree   Disagree   Slightly Disagree   Slightly Agree   Agree   Strongly Agree
      1   2   3   4   5   6

1. Studying abroad could improve my English.   (1 2 3 4 5 6)

2. Studying English can be important to me as I need it in my study abroad (1 2 3 4 5 6)

3. Studying English can be important to me as it will be helpful to get a good job in my future. (1 2 3 4 5 6)

4. A low level of English language proficiency hampers my academic attainment.(1 2 3 4 5 6)

5. A high level of English language proficiency benefits my study abroad in the USA. (1 2 3 4 5 6)

6. Attending language lessons will improve my English language proficiency.(1 2 3 4 5 6)

7. Studying English is important to me in order to get a scholarship. (1 2 3 4 5 6)

8. Compared with my classmates, I think I study English relatively harder.(1 2 3 4 5 6)

9. Whenever I think of my future career, I imagine myself using English. (1 2 3 4 5 6)

10. Actively participating in the academic activities will help in my academic capacity. (1 2 3 4 5 6)

Appendix II

Interview for inductive data analysis

The open-ended questions are designed for interview. Please answer the following questions with your point of views.

1. How long have you been studying English?

2. How much time, effort, and/or financial resources have you invested in learning English before you study abroad in the States?

3. Please describe your English language learning experience home and abroad.

4. Are you satisfied with your English language proficiency?

5. What degree of English language learning fluency do you hope to achieve? What can or will you do to attain this goal?"

6. Why are you studying abroad in the US? Do you think studying abroad in the English inner circle country like the US could improve your English?

7. What are your goals of studying abroad in the States? And how do you think English will help you achieve these goals?

8. In your personal opinion, is learning English important to your academic life? In what aspects?

9. Do you think your English language proficiency affects your academic achievement?

10. To what extent do you think your English language proficiency affects your future career and development?

(Editor：Jimmie Jiang)