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Aging and ESL Learning among Older Adult Chinese-Speaking Immigrants

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Aging and ESL Learning among Older Adult Chinese-Speaking Immigrants

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I. Introduction

Older adult Chinese-speaking immigrants are one of the fastest growing populations of immigrants in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2006), one in five people in the United States will be 65 or older by 2030. In addition, the older adult population (over 65 years old) in the United States is also expected to increase their racial and ethnic diversity. Currently, older immigrants make up eight percent of all older Americans (Treas & Batalova, 2007, cited by Leach, 2009). According to the Office of Immigration Statistics (2011), older adult immigrants are a faster growing group compared to the native born population.

The percentage of China born older adult immigrants residing in the United States in 2010 was higher than both the native-born and immigrants overall: 15.4% of Chinese immigrants were65 years old or older, compared with 13.2% of the native born and 12.4% of immigrants (U.S. Department of Homeland Security [USDHS], 2012). Chinese-speaking immigrants are by far the biggest ethnic Asian American sub-community in the United States. According to USDHS, 16,000 more Chinese immigrants came to the U.S. in 2011 than in 2010. The U.S. received the second-largest number of immigrants from China (the largest number of immigrants came from Mexico). According to Yen, 35% of immigrants in the United States were from Asian countries in 2003. Immigrants from Taiwan, Mainland China, and Hong Kong constituted 21% of all the Asians that came to the United States (Yen, 2008).

After coming to the U.S., Chinese older adult immigrants have very limited resources to learn English and have little incentive to do so unless they want to naturalize. Older adults generally are less likely to attend schools. In particular, minority older adult immigrants are less likely to attend schools than mainstream older adults (Merriam & Caffarella, 2006). Compared with younger generations, many older adult immigrants simply acquire their Green Cards because of the law of family reunifications (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security [USDHS] (2012), more than half of Chinese immigrants gain Green Cards through the family basis route. They usually do not work or attend school in the United States, so they might miss opportunities to learn the English language. This population is potentially isolated and vulnerable and has a harder time adapting to a different environment. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the language learning experience of this specific population.

Older adult Chinese immigrants have to learn English to participate in mainstream society and pass a citizenship interview if they wish to naturalize. Despite the fact that many older adult immigrants are potentially isolated and vulnerable, most research related to ESL learning and immigrants focuses on K-12 and college students (Louie, 2004; McKay & Wong, 1996) or younger adults (Peirce, 1995). Older adult Chinese immigrants might be underrepresented in research because few researchers have access to this population.

Only a small portion of literature has touched on older adult immigrants and SLA, but most of it is quantitative research that focuses on statistical analysis, such as participants' age-of-arrival and ESL learning (Service & Crank, 1993; Mackey & Sachs, 2012). Therefore, conducting research by using multiple qualitative research methods is crucial to understanding a combination of unique factors of older adult Chinese immigrants' ESL learning. This study is a qualitative research study that examines the older adult Chinese immigrants' ESL learning experience on naturalization content.

This article focuses on how aging affects ESL learning. According to Su and Conaway (1995), older adults are the newest and most influential minority group in the U.S. Older adult Chinese immigrants are highly motivated to learn English. Nearly half of the participants in Su and Conaway's study (1995) cited learning English as their most needed goal in the educational information category. Cheung found that some of the most significant problems among elderly Chinese immigrants are language and communication issues (Cheung,

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1989, as cited in Su & Conaway, 1995). Therefore, the older adult Chinese-speaking community requires information on ESL learning strategies that can accommodate their needs.

However, the literature has seldom paid attention to older adult L2 learners. The literature in SLA has not yet developed a complete theory of how aging affects second language acquisition. Although previous quantitative research shows that older adults progress more slowly in ESL learning than younger adults, the reasons are still not clear (Long, 1996; Wang, 1999).

This study, on the other hand, explores the relationship between aging and SLA from both cognitive and social cultural perspectives. This research shows there is a combination of reasons that contribute to the challenges of this population's ESL learning. For example, the student participants in this study experienced issues including memory loss, decreases in processing speed, pronunciation and listening comprehension difficulties, and being obsessed with details in their ESL learning. In addition, the student participants identified social and cultural barriers such as health concerns because of stress arising from ineffective ESL learning strategies, pressure to pass the citizenship test, inexperience in using technology, and lack of confidence.

II. Overview

There are conflicting opinions on whether a student's age has an influence on his/her learning experience of naturalization content. According to Mast, Zimmerman, and Rowe (2009), both age-related brain changes and the learning activities of older adults are still mostly unclear according to this empirical investigation. During the interviews with the volunteer teachers, they had different opinions on how the student's age plays an important role in preparing for the naturalization test. According to Larry, younger students sometimes progressed more than older students and vice versa. It all depended on how much they studied. Larry claimed: "From what I see, age does not make a difference on this set of individuals." Also, Jeff stated: "I guess it all depends on their level of previous experience with English. Age is not an issue." Justin also noticed, "I feel older adults seemed to [be] more likely to state [or] to offer what you can change, asserting their opinions." Older adult students in his class improved after 6 months. They spoke more fluently. Their pronunciation improved. In contrast, in a study conducted by Service and Craik (1993), older adults werefound to be slower than younger adults in learning foreign languages. Wang's findings (1999) showed that Chinese women immigrants, whose age of arrival was 40 to55, had a harder time in English listening and pronunciation than their classmates, whose age of arrival was 25 to 35. Both findings also indicated that the ability to learn a L2 declines as learners' ages increased in adulthood. During my interview with the volunteer teacher, Mr. Wu, he stated that the older adult students' memories were not as good as the younger ones. He advised his older students to spend more time preparing for the naturalization test. However, he felt that the main difference was not the memory or other cognitive development issues, but was that they did not learn English at K-12 school settings.

The conflicting opinions show that there are various reasons in aging and ESL learning beyond older adults' cognitive development. However, the previous quantitative research did not take these factors into account. Therefore, this qualitative research is important because we can examine aging and ESL learning from both cognitive and sociocultural perspectives.

III. Overview of the Student Participants

The participants of this study were four older adult students and four volunteer citizenship teachers at the ESL program at PCCC. However, I talked with other students and teachers during my class observation and they also provided me with valuable insight for this research. All of the student participants were Chinese-speaking immigrants who had been in the U.S. for at least four years and are 65 years old or older. I conducted research with the participants from September 1, 2012 to February 1, 2013. During this time period, I spent about four to six hours every week in observing students' classes. I interviewed volunteer teachers and students. I analyzed textbooks, handouts, lesson plans, students' reflection notes, and students' class notes from the naturalization class. First, I discuss briefly the four student participants. All of the names of the participants are pseudonyms.

Mr. Kuo was from Taiwan. He was 67 years old. He was a government employee. He held a Green Card for more than ten years, but traveled between Taiwan and the U.S. After retiring three years ago, he settled down in the U.S. He lived with his wife and daughter in the suburbs. He also had a son who works in California. He learned English when he was at secondary school and college. However, he still had difficulty listening to and speaking English. Mr. Kuo spoke Chinese at home and at the church, which was his main social setting. He used to study ESL at a community college but focused mainly on naturalization content before passing the naturalization exam. He passed the naturalization exam and had naturalized in November 2012. After naturalization, he spent most of his time at home with his wife and babysitting his friend's two babies.

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However, he still attended ESL classes offered by PCCC on Saturdays regularly.

Mr. Lin was from Northern China. He was 79 years old. He started learning English 7 years ago when he first came to the U.S. He was a professor of physical education in China. He learned Russian and studied with a Russian professor when he was at a university. After coming to the U.S., he lived with his wife in senior housing. He spoke Chinese at home. He was the only one participant who had not applied for the naturalization exam. He told me there were multiple reasons that he did not want to naturalize, but the main reason was that the Chinese government might cancel his pension. Nevertheless, he still came to the classes to learn naturalization content. Naturalization classes at PCCC made him interested in English. He wanted to learn daily life English. He regularly wrote articles in a local Chinese newspaper, which showed his desire to communicate with Chinese readers through words. He wanted to work as a writer and translator in the future. He was the only participant who wanted to learn reading and writing in English beyond naturalization content.

Ms. Wong was from Canton, China. She was 72 years old. Ms. Wong was a homemaker. She started learning English after she came to the U.S. five years ago. She studied Russian when she was at secondary school. She was retired and lived both in senior housing and at her daughter's apartment. She spoke Chinese mostly but sometimes spoke English with her 10-year-old granddaughter. She studied at PCCC for two years. It took two hours for her to come to the center from her daughter's home. However, she failed the naturalization exam twice. After that, she took some time off before trying again. She thought the test was unfair because "my questions were much harder than the questions of others" but later admitted that she did not have enough of a foundation of English to pass the exam. She had been busy taking care of her daughter and granddaughter since then.

Ms. Chen came from Central China four years ago. She was 65 years old. She owned a small factory in China. She studied Russian in China in secondary school. She started learning English after she married her European American husband 4 years ago. She was retired and lived with her husband. Her husband was an English speaker and did not speak Chinese. She was the only participant who spoke English at home. There were usually two international students living with them. She studied ESL at a community college while studying for naturalization at PCCC. However, she failed the exam in November 2012. She also expressed that the test was not fair and "they already decided who won't pass before the test began." She passed the citizenship exam on the second attempt in January 2013. She did not come back to the center after that.

Memory loss and processing speed: All student participants felt that memory loss was an issue. Ms. Wong explained this by stating: "I can't remember much at all, and I am afraid talking to others [in English]." Mr. Kuo added that: "My memory is not good. Whatever I studied for today, I will forget tomorrow. I study every day, but the result is not very good." According to Mr. Kuo and Ms. Wong, "My memory in daily life is bad, but in studying English is worse." However, research shows that older adult students' decrease in processing speed, instead of memory loss, might be more significant in their L2 learning. According to Mast, Zimmerman, and Rowe (2009), the possibility that learning will be affected by age is great because learning relies on multiple cognitive abilities, and declines in any ability could cause an impact on learning itself. A person's general pattern of verbal memory, verbal ability, and numeric ability usually remains stable until their 70s or 80s. However, a person's processing has been found to show regular decline starting in middle adulthood (Mast, Zimmerman, and Rowe, 2009). Therefore, the issue might not be the memory loss, but the processing speed of the participants. Participants might not have enough time to understand the content. A study by Service and Craik showed that (1993), when learning new vocabulary, all the participants tried to think of connections between familiar vocabulary and the new words, but the older participants often failed to do so. Keeping a slow pace and using enough reviewing activities might be crucial to this population. Mr. Lin stated that older adult students have to spend more time studying English than younger people. Mr. Wu also said: "learning English is like a cooking process. We need to cook the language gradually. Only when enough effort is spent can we cook it well." This information could be useful for administrators and ESL teachers and help in designing curriculum for older adult learners.

Not only the teachers should know this idea, but also educators can let the students know by discussing how this information can help students adjust their learning process. For example, by allowing enough time for students to attain the knowledge, this would increase their confidence because they know that they can still learn new things.

Health Issues: Health issues, including both psychological and physical health, might hinder this population from learning English and preparing for the naturalization test. Based on my classroom observation, many of the students at PCCC had some minor health concerns, such as hearing loss and eye issues. They often asked teachers to speak louder and write larger on the board. Some students had more serious illnesses, such as high blood pressure. For example, Mr. Lin had high blood pressure. His daughter did not want him to

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study because she feared for his well-being. Ms. Wong also had some health concerns (nose problems and headaches), so she had to take a break before re-taking the test. Teachers should be sensitive and aware of their students' discomfort in the classroom.

This population should be aware of the possible drawbacks of extensive ESL learning. Several older adult students encountered health concerns during their preparation for the naturalization exam. Mr. Lin talked about another classmate who studied at the center, and passed away because of high blood pressure. He thought it might be related to the preparation for the naturalization test, and felt older people should be aware of their health conditions while learning English. Based on my conversations with the participants, the anxiety toward the naturalization exam could be unbearable. One of the common complaints was that many participants had trouble sleeping at night. According to Ms. Wong, her daughter reminded her to be careful while learning English at PCCC because older people might have chronic diseases such as high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes. According to Mr. Lin, after learning English, he started having headaches and he thought it was because of studying English. At the beginning of the class, Mr. Lin felt his classmates all seemed to be healthy, however, after a period of time, many of them looked older. He thought that this might be due to the pressure of learning the naturalization content in English. Preparing for the exam could have been a burden for the participants because they were generally nervous about the upcoming exam and very anxious about not passing the test. To help this, teachers could assure the students that they can keep taking the test until they pass the test. In addition, arranging outreach activities for immigrants to engage in conversation with USCIS officials or organizing tours to visit USCIS field offices before the exam might be helpful. If students could talk to USCIS officers before taking the test, they might be less anxious while preparing for it.

Issue of technology usage: Technology was important for the older adult students to learn English and their abilities varied greatly. Ms. Wong could not use computers, Mr. Lin and Mr. Kuo used computers daily, and Mr. Chen used electronic dictionaries daily. According to Ms. Wong, she had a computer, but she did not know how to use it and her family was too busy to teach her. During the interview, I tried to explain to Ms. Wong how to use the computer to look up words' meanings and pronunciations. However, at the follow up interview, Ms. Wong still had not used a computer for ESL learning. According to Ms. Chen, she carried an electronic dictionary with her every day. She looked words up whenever she encountered a word she didn't recognize. She said: "Sometime I use it when I talk with my husband." Jeff also mentioned that all of the students used electronic dictionaries in his class. It might be surprising that Mr. Lin and Ms. Chen, among many older adult students, heavily relied on computers and electronic dictionaries to learn English and prepare for the test. It was equally surprising that no student in Larry's class used a traditional dictionary. Based on the interviews with students, students also stated that looking up words in print dictionaries took too much time. It might be that the font in the dictionaries was too small, and the process was time consuming.

While many older adults used computers and electronic dictionaries to learn English, there were still some of students that had not learned how to use computers. To address this problem, administrators could design classes that integrate ESL class and computer class in computer labs. Older adult students could access more information and resources from the mainstream community if they had a basic understanding of English and computer skills.

Pronunciation issue: There are conflicting opinions about age and pronunciation based on my interviews. According to Mr. Wu, he had to speak louder when teaching older adult students. In addition, he often corrected their pronunciation multiple times before any minor improvement occurred. In contrast, Justin stated that pronunciation is generally difficult for English learners regardless of their age. For example, all of his students had difficulties distinguishing "R"&"L." According to Larry, "they tend to add on another vowel on the end of word. Likesaying '*electa*' instead of elect. I am not sure why, and I try to get them not to do that." From the students' perspective, Mr. Kuo stated: "Listening and speaking are the most difficult parts for me." Ms. Chen added, "my ear wasn't very good. My daughter told me I couldn't learn certain words." Even though the teachers had different opinions regarding the relation between age and pronunciation, all four student participants felt they had a harder time with pronunciation. Based on my observation, pronunciation can be very hard for some participants. Some students had difficulties saying, "I like America." Some students had difficulties distinguishing *weather* and *winter*. Their lack of previous ESL learning experience might be significant because research shows that pronunciation can be highly correlated with age (Long, 1996).

The literature in SLA seems to agree that generally the younger the students are, the better their pronunciation is (Ellis, 1998; Long, 1996). Service and Craik (1993) also suggest that learning pronunciation requires learners' short-term memory, which decreases significantly after middle age. Their pronunciation might hinder them in gaining naturalization. One teaching implication is that educators could arrange pronunciation classes which are specific to Chinese-

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speaking immigrants, focusing on pronunciation like "R" and "L."

Listening comprehension issues: Older Chinese-speaking immigrants might have difficulties with listening comprehension. During my classroom observations, I heard the students ask the teacher many times to speak slower or say the sentence again. Mr. Wu also mentioned that he had to speak slower when talking with older students. Despite living in the U.S. for at least four years, many of the participants were still not familiar with the manner and speed of native English speakers. Their decreasing hearing ability might be the issue.

The students' extensive focus on naturalization content might be another issue. According to Larry, students knew the textbook very well and they could understand the content even when Larry spoke fast. However, if he asked students questions that were not in the textbook, the students usually could not understand them. One of the common reasons that the students at PCCC failed the naturalization exam was that they could not understand what the immigration officers said when they asked questions beyond the naturalization content. Both Ms. Wong and Ms. Chen failed the exam because they had a hard time understanding the interviewer's questions. Even though they could not understand which questions they failed, they were sure that those questions were not from the textbooks. According to Ms. Wong, she worked very hard to memorize the naturalization content, but the interviewer asked a question outside of the naturalization content, such as a topic relating to her children or to her apartment. This showed the importance of knowing basic English that falls outside of the naturalization content. Students tried very hard to learn the naturalization content, but focusing exclusively on the textbookwas not sufficient in improving their English ability. In conclusion, I believe students will have difficulty understanding basic conversation questions.

Based on my observations, the students compensated for their limited listening comprehension by clarifying information with their classmates in the classrooms. The few advanced students translated and answered questions for others in the classroom. According to Justin, the students helped each other and the advanced students helped him translate English to Mandarin. When students had different opinions about answering a question, they might have argued openly during the class, even when the teacher wanted to move on. The classroom atmosphere could be intense at times, but mostly was very supportive and collaborative among the students.

The participants would have benefited from interaction with English speakers or including class material in their daily life vocabulary in order to improve their vocabulary and listening comprehension. Once, Larry told Mr. Lin: "you have good writing," but Mr. Lin thought Larry asked him to read a sentence. Sometimes the students were just guessing what the teacher was saying. That was probably the reason so many students talked to each other in Chinese during class - they were trying to find out what the teacher was saying. I noticed that many students preferred guessing rather than asking teachers to clarify, even in Mr. Wu's class to whom they could speak Chinese. Many students in the class had difficulties understanding the lectures. Therefore, they asked a few advanced classmates to translate for them. I did notice that few students tried to answer most of the questions, and most students were quiet and only spoke Chinese to each other to clarify their questions. In order to improve, students need to learn how to ask for clarification. Educators could encourage students to ask more questions. Students need to understand that they will not be punished for not understanding the questions.

Issue of students' obsession involving vocabulary and pronunciation: I noticed that participants might get caught up with small details and could not move on. Larry mentioned: "I do notice that students will hang up on a spelling or an individual word. Sometimes they got caught up with a vowel, close "a" or open "a," they would be very concerned about the minor and tiny details." During the classroom observation, there weretimes that the whole class could not move on because students were arguing whether certain words needed to be capitalized or not. Both students and teachers' interviews showed that this population had a strong tendency to try to understand everything before moving on.

Students were found to be afraid that the interviewer would ask questions which they had not heard before, so they felt they had to prepare for as much vocabulary as possible. Some participants had very limited access to English speakers. The social network and learning opportunities outside of the classroom had an impact on my participants' view of ESL learning. Without exposure to native English speakers, they considered English as a subject instead of a communication tool. In other words, they might focus on certain infrequently used words or pronunciation because they felt they were compelled to study all the new vocabulary. As a result, they could not move on to more important concepts during class because they were still worried about memorizing the vocabulary and its pronunciation. However, when they interacted with non-Chinese speakers, it was certain that they would encounter new vocabulary or expressions. This factor might hinder their interaction with English speakers or the ability to pass the naturalization exam because they might not be able to respond to questions

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they are unfamiliar with. English teachers can help beginning students understand which words are more frequently used in general conversation. For advanced students, asking students to watch movies or TV shows in English would be helpful in giving them authentic input.

Confidence issues: Lack of confidence was one of the main issues that student participants needed to face in ESL learning. According to Mr. Lin, "when I was young and heard someone who started to learn a foreign language in his/her 40s, I thought that must be a waste of time. Now my age is nearly doubled as those people and I come back to the class to learn English from the beginning." Wang (1999) suggests that immigrant women with a later-age-of-arrivalare less confident in ESL learning. Indeed, for many older adult learners at PCCC, they generally felt that older adults could not learn a new language. According to Justin, their lack of confidence in memorization seemed to be the biggest problem. He said:"In some cases, they seem not to be confident with their ability to learn. They said 'I am stupid because I am old, so it's hard for me to learn English.'" Ms. Chen also felt that she was not confident in learning English because "Chinese people have a harder time learning English because English and Chinese languages are very different." Many participants felt that learning English at an older age was hard or nearly impossible because of their age or first language. Older adult students may be able to gain confidence by talking with English speakers. In addition, they can see the importance of communicative learning approach, which can boost their confidence and change their learning strategies.

This study does not find residential issues or career issues to be significant on the participants' identities or their ESL learning. Based on my observations, they mostly lived in isolation from the mainstream community. As a result, it did not matter if they lived in a Chinatown type area or in a suburban area. All four participants had not worked after coming to the U.S., so they did not experience any career downturn issues. However, it should be noted that they still might want to work. For example, Mr. Lin expressed interest in a teaching or writing career, but his options were limited to the Chinese-speaking communities.

IV. Students' Coping Strategies

For most students in the program, they did not have any foundation of English before preparing for the naturalization test. Because of the lack of an English foundation, many students developed unorthodox learning methods that possibly hindered them from learning English and gaining citizenship. According to Mast, Zimmerman, and Rowe (2009), the decrease of abilities in memory, processing speed and executive functioning might force older adults to change their learning methods, settings and goals. Based on my observation with the class and data analysis, the students sometimes would write Chinese characters on their textbooks and in correctly match these with the English pronunciation. However, the Chinese and English language pronunciations are very different and these notes only confuse students and teachers. Ms. Wong did not learn the English alphabet and its pronunciation at the beginning of her English studies and expresses this by saying; "I do not know Chinese pinyin or English alphabets. Sometimes I use Chinese characters to substitute for English pronunciation. It's not accurate." Even though she knew this method is not accurate, she still used it to remind her of the pronunciation. This issue shows that the participants needed to learn the English alphabet and basic English pronunciation. Teaching students how to use electronic dictionaries and online resources might be helpful in assisting them to look up specific vocabulary words.

Memorization and repetition were the most common coping strategies for the participants overall. According to Mr. Wu, some students would write the sentences repeatedly to remember the content. Other students listened and read the sentences repeatedly to remember the content. Larry also supports this by saying, "well, I look at their books, similar to me, you can tell they are really reading this book, a lot of notes in their book, I think that's the primary way they are learning is repetition." In addition, Mr. Lin adds: "There are about 1000 vocabulary words and 500 sentences in naturalization exam. There was some difficult vocabulary, such as 'allegiance', 'exclusion', or 'alimony.'"With very little English comprehension, the participants tried to memorize all the vocabulary and sentences. The common strategy was to listen to the audio tape consisting of questions and answers, and write the sentences over and over. Justin supports this by saying, "A lot of time I say something they will repeat. They repeat after me even if I didn't ask." Repetition was greatly emphasized, but understanding the content, on the other hand, was ignored by the students. However, repetition and memorization without understanding the content would make ESL learning difficult because the students would only be guessing the sentence meaning by the key words they have been taught. This learning method can also be problematic in the naturalization interview. For example, Ms. Wong failed the exam because of her listening comprehension and vocabulary level. The interviewer asked her "have you read the instructions before you decide whether to change your name or not?" However, she only understood the word "weather" so she thought the question was "how is the weather today?" and she failed the exam. Based on my

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interview with her, she explained that she heard the word "weather" and ended up linking that to a possible question, but it was far from the correct one. Encouraging students to learn how to clarify questions would be important for this population. For example, a student could ask "Can you say it again?" or "Can you say it in another way?"

A memorization only strategy would make it hard for the participants to use and understand English. Ms. Wong talked about how her friends told her not to worry about understanding phrases, but only to memorize certain phrases. For example, when asked "how are you," just answer "I am fine." As a result, she might answer with phrases but not know what they mean. Ms. Wong also mentioned: "I didn't learn English when I was young, so what I can do now is only to memorize [the naturalization content]." I suggested that Ms. Wong learn beginning English grammar and vocabulary. However, she felt that she did not have enough time to learn from the basic alphabet. She insisted on learning the naturalization content only. Ms. Wong said that she intended to pass the exam as soon as possible, so she focused only on the naturalization exam. As a result, she could only memorize the fixed questions and answers. Based on my classroom observations, not only Ms. Wong, but also many other students at PCCC had similar ideas. One teacher told the students "you may sit", but no one moved. It turned out that the students could only understood "sit down", not "you may sit." The students might have had a very high level of English vocabulary but at the same time did not understand the basic phrases.

Some of the students might have thought that studying basic ESL content was a waste of time because the naturalization exam mainly focused on history and civics. One student in the program told me that if any question started with "have you ever….", then the answer was no. In addition, the challenges and age of older adult students might be recognized at the naturalization test. How can students expect to pass the exam by these learning strategies? Many students believed that older age made it easier for them to pass. When USCIS officers visited PCCC during an outreach event, the officers shared with the students at PCCC that they would take into account the students' ages and their health condition when evaluating their English ability. Ms. Wong exemplifies this by saying "I am not interested in languages. I hope the officer will give me a break because of my age, but it didn't go well." Ms. Wong said that some officers made it easier for older adult people but not for her. Based on my interviews with the participants who took the test, the policy was not clear and it varied depending on the individual interviewer. The policy might mislead some participants to feel that they could pass the exam without understanding the content.

Failing a naturalization test can affect student learning strategies, even shifting their identities. Ms. Wong talked about how after she failed the first exam, she wanted to give up. She said: "I failed the naturalization exam the first time and I didn't want to study for 7 or 8 days. In China, I was a housewife and I didn't go out much. I was a little scared when talking to the officers. I was sad because I don't have foundation of English, so I only could memorize." Ms. Wong used to have rigid and fixed ideas about learning English. However, she realized the disadvantages to this, and changed her learning strategies because of her test failing experience.

After failing twice, Ms. Wong changed her attitude. She mentioned that she would start working on beginning English grammar and vocabulary and later try to understand the naturalization content. Mr. Lin also had a more interactive way of learning English. According to Mr. Lin, "I observed people talk. My wife and I practice English together, too." Although students memorized most of the naturalization exam content, they were still required to have a basic understanding of English grammar, speaking, and listening comprehension. Based on my observations, students who refused to work on the English foundation and solely depended on memorization had higher failing rates than the students who had a basic foundation of English comprehension. Even though memorization might be the primary model of learning within many Asian cultures, this strategy related to the learners' lack of a foundation in English comprehension. The students were often not confident in learning English and felt it would take too long for them to build their foundational English. Instructors should ask students interview questions in different ways, so students can understand that they could not rely on memorizing the fixed questions or answers. Students should understand that questions can be asked in multiple ways. Administrators should advise students to take beginning English courses even though the students want to apply for naturalization. More beginning English classes before preparing for naturalization would be beneficial to many older adult Chinese-speaking immigrants.

Based on the findings of this study, I summarize the participants' learning experiences in the following table.

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Table 1: Overview of the Student Participants' ESL Learning

	Focus of four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing)	Challenges of ESL learning	Opportunities	Technology	Learning strategies	Classroom behavior
Ms. Chen	Listening and speaking	1. Confidence 2. Memory	Plenty of opportunities	1. Computer 2.Electronic dictionary	1. Write; 2.Learn from family members	Active
Mr. Kuo	Listening and speaking	Memory	None; only talk with Chinese speakers	1. Computer 2. I-phone	Listen to the tape everyday	quiet
Ms. Wong	Listening and speaking	1. Memory 2. Afraid of speaking & pronunciation	Talk to her Granddaughter	None / don't know how to use computer	1. Listen to tape often; 2. Write	quiet
Mr. Lin	All	N/A	Talk with his wife (Chinese speaker) in English	Computer	Write often	Very active

V. Discussion

a) Aging and ESL Learning

The current literature does not distinguish younger adult learners from older adult learners, but there are clearly two different populations. This research shows the unique perspective of older adult learners, including both cognitive and social challenges. However, this research also shows the strengths of older adults' ESL learning. This research study may inspire future research regarding older adult learners and SLA.

Cognitive development: Does ESL learning make an impact on older adults' health? Many older adult students at PCCC felt stressed about the naturalization test. One participant stated that the stress might cause serious health issues, like high blood pressure or a stroke. Older adults might be more likely to have health concerns than younger adult learners. It correlated that they might be more likely to have health concerns when under stress from learning English.

Ineffective learning strategies might also be the primary cause of their stress. Based on my observations, older adult students focus on memorization without English foundations. This learning strategy might cause extra frustration and stress because it is unlikely that learners will achieve expected desirable results through this method. On the other hand, older learners are often limited in their learning approaches if they are unfamiliar with computers, and older individuals often struggle with computer use. In addition, social isolation is also related to learners' learning strategies. Without being exposed to English speakers, learners will be forced to adopt certain learning strategies, like memorization of the textbooks or repetition from audiotapes.

As mentioned before, most quantitative research regarding aging and ESL learning only focuses on one or two variables, such as decreasing working memory, confidence, or environment issues. However, this research shows that aging is a complicated issue for learners, for it does not only deal with one issue, but a combination of issues, including both cognitive and social challenges. In the cognitive aspect, memory loss and decreasing processing speed are highly related. Both issues also relate to learners' hearing and pronunciation abilities. Learners who have memory loss or decreasing processing speed have a harder time with their hearing ability because they cannot keep up with the speed of the speaker.

PCCC has to accommodate both younger and older learners in the ESL classroom. Two populations have different learning paces and preferences. Younger learners often prefer a faster pace in learning new knowledge and less review activities. In contrast, older learners prefer a slower-paced class and to have ample review sessions. Younger learners often work full time and take care of their children, so they can hardly dedicate to studying. On the other hand, older learners can focus exclusively on preparing for the test.

In addition, older adult students often develop a close relationship with the teachers. The population views teachers as friends or family members. On the contrary, younger learners usually do not develop any personal relationship with teachers. In summary, older adult students have extra free time in ESL learning. Teachers may have extra office or class hours for older adult students that focus on review activities. In addition, teachers can have additional social time with the older adult learners. Older adult students can utilize the extra time and still keep up with the younger classmates.

Social challenges: Isolation from the mainstream community can make the participants have a narrow perspective of Americans. Some participants still felt that they were not Americans, even though they have already naturalized. Ms. Chen told me "the second generation [of Chinese immigrants] is the worst. They were born here and think they are Americans. In fact, they are still not real Americans." Ms. Chen defined

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Americans as white native English speakers. Because of her own definition of Americans, she felt she was not an American even after her naturalization. The participants felt rejected by American society, and harbor feelings which reinforced the idea that they were not Americans. The participants felt they were not real Americans because as Mr. Lin stated: "even though you call yourself an American, others still don't think you are a real American." They felt a lack of acceptance from the mainstream community. In my opinion, they were insecure about their own identities partly because they relocated to a different country at an older age. Older Chinese immigrants may not have access to linguistic resources because they feel they are not accepted by the mainstream community.

VI. Summary

Cognitive and sociocultural factors might be equally important in second language acquisition for this population. This research found that aging is not the only factor that hinders older adult Chinese-speaking immigrants' ESL learning. Older adult Chinese immigrants had multiple challenges in ESL learning, including their confidence in learning, their lack of previous learning experience, health issues related to the tests, and a lack of social settings that encouraged them to learn English. In addition, their learning strategies, which focused on memorization and repetition, could also hinder them from understanding the content and the way English is used on a daily life basis.

Educators can redesign the curriculum to include more repetitive activities, teaching the content at a slower pace, hosting more social activities and even encouraging the students to go back to school or to join the workforce. In addition, based on my observations, it was best to advise students, who lacked previous learning experience, to start learning the English alphabet and grammar, instead of simply memorizing the naturalization content.

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