Article

"It's Easier Talking to a Machine": Privacy, Motivation, and the Underuse of English Language Labs in a Sino-Foreign University in China

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ABSTRACT: Despite significant investment, English language labs (ELLs) at transnational campuses remain underutilized beyond mandatory course requirements. This qualitative case study draws on thematic analysis of interviews with 22 Chinese undergraduates at a Sino-American branch campus in mainland China. Students value the ELL's diagnostic feedback and low-anxiety speaking practice. However, voluntary use is hindered by severe privacy concerns and accent-related anxiety in open layouts, widespread unawareness, outdated and generic content, and competition from mobile apps. Three learner personas emerge: the Anxious Beginner, Test-Prepper, and Advanced Critic. Informed by self-determination theory and foreign language anxiety research, the findings highlight how cultural "face" concerns and poor facility design undermine engagement. Students propose soundproof booths, targeted promotion, and personalized diagnostic pathways. The study offers actionable recommendations to transform ELLs into inclusive, sought-after resources in English-medium transnational education.

INTRODUCTION

Global Proliferation & The Practical Paradox

The rapid growth of international branch campuses (IBCs) in Asia has placed facilities such as the English Language Lab (ELL) at the center of efforts to support domestic students in English-medium instruction (EMI) environments (Knight, 2011). Designed as self-access hubs for pronunciation and speaking practice, these labs represent a significant institutional investment aimed at democratizing high-fidelity language tools. However, a persistent, practical paradox is observed: ELLs are bustling only when professors mandate attendance for course credit and stand nearly empty during voluntary hours. This chronic underuse, despite substantial investment, raises urgent questions about equity, inclusion, and the real-world efficacy of technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) in transnational higher education (Noman et al., 2023).

While the participants in this study are domestic Chinese citizens studying in their home country, their immersion in a fully English-medium, Sino-foreign university positions them as a critical yet underresearched constituency within the broader landscape of international and transnational education (Ren & Wang, 2021), precisely the population the Journal of International Students seeks to foreground.

The Scholarly Gap & Contextual Complexity

The existing CALL literature champions the potential of ELLs for autonomous skill building but often overlooks the situated barriers within non-Western contexts. In China-based IBCs, EMI mandates intersect with culturally embedded factors such as "face-saving" and speaking anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017), which can be exacerbated by open-plan lab designs. Concurrently, the rise of convenient mobile learning apps fragments student attention, rendering physical labs seemingly obsolete (Nazeer et al., 2024). This study addresses these intertwined gaps by centering student voices to ask: What unique value does the ELL offer, and how do psychological, environmental, and motivational hurdles undermine its potential in a post-pandemic, digitally saturated learning landscape?

Guided by these questions, this paper presents a thematic analysis of 22 semi-structured interviews with Chinese undergraduates at a Sino-American IBC. Our findings reveal a central conflict: students value the ELL's diagnostic feedback and low-anxiety potential but are repelled by privacy concerns, lack of

awareness, outdated content, and the convenience of digital alternatives. From these data, we derive three learner personas and strategic recommendations. Theoretically, we extend self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020) by applying it to the physical-digital hybrid space of the ELL, arguing that unmet needs for autonomy and relatedness fuel purely extrinsic engagement. Practically, we provide a roadmap for IBC administrators to transform underused labs into personalized, psychologically safe hubs that truly support student proficiency and belonging.

The scale of the challenge is considerable. China now hosts more than 2,500 Sino-foreign cooperative programs and over 50 full joint-venture campuses (International Campuses, 2025), enrolling hundreds of thousands of domestic students in English-medium curricula. However, first-year attrition rates in many EMI programs hover between 15% and 25%, with language-related difficulties consistently cited as a primary driver (Noman et al., 2023). English Language Labs were introduced as a flagship solution: dedicated, technology-rich spaces intended to bridge the gap between classroom input and autonomous speaking practice. Institutionally, they represent significant capital investment, specialized software licenses, acoustic treatment, and staffing, yet internal usage logs at the study site reveal a stark reality: average daily voluntary attendance rarely exceeds 5–8 students in a facility designed for 60 simultaneous users. This paradox is not unique to one campus; administrators at multiple Sino-foreign IBCs report identical patterns of "mandate-only" engagement.

The persistence of this underuse is particularly troubling given recent empirical evidence on the efficacy of the very technologies embedded in these labs. Automatic speech recognition tools that deliver explicit, visual corrective feedback have been shown to produce significant gains in pronunciation (Thi-Nhu Ngo et al., 2024), and well-managed physical labs in other contexts have significantly boosted speaking confidence and skill (Jamila et al., 2025; Sabudu et al., 2021). Why, then, do students who acknowledge the lab's diagnostic superiority nevertheless avoid it? Existing research offers only partial answers, often focusing on faculty experiences, policy implementation, or fully online environments while neglecting the lived realities of domestic undergraduates in physical-digital hybrid spaces. Similarly, in a Russian EMI university, Volkova and Kolesov (2022) found that domestic students faced distinct adaptation challenges compared to international students, including lower motivation for social integration and dissatisfaction with faculty English proficiency, despite comparable academic integration. This study fills that gap by foregrounding an underrepresented constituency, Chinese nationals studying in their home country yet navigating fully English-medium transnational education, and by examining the interplay of affective, cultural, and design factors that transform a theoretically powerful resource into a chronically empty room.

The following three research questions guided this study:

- RQ1: What perceived benefits and unique affordances do domestic Chinese undergraduates attribute to the campus English Language Lab in comparison to classroom instruction and mobile applications?

- RQ2: What psychological, environmental, cultural, and practical barriers prevent voluntary engagement with the ELL in a transnational EMI context?
- RQ3: How can student-generated insights and emergent learner personas inform the redesign of physical self-access language labs to better support intrinsic motivation and linguistic belonging?

These questions directly address the infrastructure-practice hiatus documented in transnational EMI scholarship while centering the underrepresented voice of a Global South student.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rapid expansion of English-medium instruction (EMI) at transnational universities has intensified the need for practical, scalable support for students' speaking and pronunciation skills (Dai & Hardy, 2022; Hu & Lei, 2014; Jablonkai & Hou, 2023; Jamila et al., 2025). In response, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) tools utilizing automatic speech recognition (ASR) have emerged as a promising solution. A recent meta-analysis of 25 studies confirms their strong potential, reporting a large overall effect size (Hedges' $g = 0.74$) for pronunciation development, with explicit, visual corrective feedback yielding substantially larger gains ($g = 0.86$) than indirect feedback alone (Thi-Nhu Ngo et al., 2024).

However, this robust evidence base derives predominantly from controlled classroom or fully online environments. The physical self-access language lab, a hybrid space combining dedicated hardware, specialized CALL software, and on-site support, remains critically underresearched (Akpan et al., 2024; Sabudu et al., 2021), especially in transnational EMI contexts in Asia. This gap matters because cultural and affective factors profoundly mediate technological efficacy. Foreign-language speaking anxiety, driven by fear of negative evaluation and concerns over "face," is particularly acute among East Asian learners (Horwitz et al., 1986; Mak, 2011; Öztürk & Küçükaydın, 2025; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017). An open-plan lab where spoken practice is audible to peers can therefore inadvertently heighten rather than reduce anxiety, undermining the very affective affordances technology is meant to provide (Ahmed, 2024).

Self-determination theory (SDT) offers a powerful explanatory lens: intrinsic, sustained motivation requires the satisfaction of competence, autonomy, and relatedness needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). While ASR tools can directly enhance competence through precise feedback, typical lab designs may simultaneously threaten relatedness (fear of peer judgment) and autonomy (generic, nonpersonalized content), pushing students toward purely extrinsic engagement, a pattern observed across resource-constrained Global South settings (Nazeer et al., 2024). Although SDT has been widely applied to language learning, its specific use to understand voluntary uptake of physical self-access CALL facilities in non-Western contexts remains limited (Noels et al., 2019).

A further contrast emerges when Western CALL assumptions are set alongside East Asian realities. Many foundational CALL studies implicitly

assume a learner who is comfortable with public error-making and values autonomy above relational harmony (Levy, 2009). In contrast, recent work in Vietnam, Turkey, and China underscores that the environment and motivation are reciprocally linked: physical spaces that threaten "face" or social relatedness directly suppress willingness to speak, even when technology is pedagogically superior (Hang et al., 2025; Öztürk & Küçükaydın, 2025). This cultural-affective dimension is rarely foregrounded in the lab-design literature, creating a blind spot that the present study directly addresses.

This study, therefore, addresses recent calls for more nuanced sociocultural investigations of physical-digital learning spaces (Ahmed, 2024; Tafazoli et al., 2025). By integrating technological evidence from CALL research, affective insights from speaking-anxiety scholarship, and the motivational framework of SDT, it examines why a facility equipped with proven ASR technology nevertheless fails to attract voluntary use among domestic Chinese undergraduates in a Sino-American IBC and what student-centered redesign might finally close this infrastructure-practice gap.

METHOD

This study was conducted at a Sino-American international branch campus (IBC) in eastern China that enrolls approximately 4,000 domestic Chinese undergraduates in fully English-medium instruction (EMI) programs. The campus English Language Lab (ELL), the focus of this investigation, is a dedicated self-access facility equipped with ASR-based pronunciation software (e.g., Clear Pronunciation, EnglishCentral), individual computer stations, and limited on-site staff support. Despite heavy institutional promotion as a low-stakes speaking and listening resource, internal usage data consistently show attendance driven almost exclusively by course mandates.

Participants

Twenty-two first- and second-year Chinese undergraduates (14 female, 8 male; aged 18–21) from nine different majors participated. All were nonnative English speakers with varying self-reported proficiency (beginner to upper-intermediate). Participants were recruited through flyers posted in the ELL and university dormitories, announcements in compulsory English classes, and snowball sampling. This purposive approach ensured representation of both frequent and infrequent (including never) users of the lab. Pseudonyms (single letters) and interview dates are used throughout to protect anonymity.

Data Collection

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted between August 2025 and November 2025. Interviews lasted 15-30 minutes and were conducted in person in a private office or classroom or via Zoom to accommodate participants' schedules and reduce power imbalances associated

with on-campus settings. Interviews were conducted mainly in English, with participants able to speak Mandarin. All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit informed consent. The interview guide consisted of four main sections: (a) patterns and frequency of ELL use, (b) perceived benefits and unique value, (c) barriers and frustrations, and (d) concrete suggestions for improvement. Probing follow-up questions allowed participants to elaborate freely.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim (Mandarin interviews translated into English by the second, bilingual author). Thematic analysis followed the six-phase inductive-deductive approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). Phase 1 involved familiarization through repeated reading and initial memo writing. Phase 2 generated 187 open codes inductively. In Phase 3, codes were clustered into candidate themes. Phases 4–6 involved iterative review, refinement, and naming of final themes, with deductive structuring around self-determination theory's psychological needs (competence, autonomy, relatedness) and established constructs of foreign-language speaking anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). To illustrate this process, consider the trajectory of one final theme. Initial open codes reflecting students' discomfort, such as "fear of speaking loudly" and "afraid of accent," were first clustered into the candidate theme "Psychological-Environmental Barrier." Through iterative review and deductive consideration of relatedness needs from SDT, this cluster was refined and, in the final phase, renamed "The Primary Barrier: The 'Quiet Paradox' and the Acoustic Privacy Crisis." Member-checking was conducted with six participants to enhance credibility. Thematic saturation was reached after 20 interviews; the final two served as confirmatory cases.

Researcher Positionality

The first author is an American faculty member at the study site but holds no current administrative role and has no evaluative relationship with any participant. This insider-outsider position offered contextual understanding while risking confirmation bias toward the lab's potential. To mitigate this, reflexive journaling was maintained throughout data collection and analysis, and an external auditor (the second author) independently reviewed the coding decisions.

Ethics

The study received full approval from the university's Institutional Review Board. Participants received detailed information sheets in both Chinese and English, provided written informed consent, and were assured they could withdraw at any time without consequence. All identifiable data were removed during transcription, and audio files were stored on an encrypted server accessible only to the research team.

RESULTS

A thematic analysis of the 22 interviews revealed five interconnected themes that explain the persistent gap between the English Language Lab's (ELL) pedagogical potential and its near-total absence of voluntary use. From these themes, three distinct learner personas emerged, each with characteristic needs and barriers.

Theme 1: Diagnostic Feedback and Low Anxiety Practice ("It's Easier Talking to a Machine")

Students repeatedly contrasted the ELL's private, nonjudgmental feedback with the public correction and time pressure of classroom oral practice. Participant Q described the moment of insight: "Nobody can correct me, and I'm not aware of it. But with equipment that can correct me, I truly realize these mistakes." Several participants added that this immediate visual feedback allowed them to record and replay their own speech multiple times, something impossible in class, gradually building awareness of fossilized errors they had carried since high school. Participant B captured the affective relief: "If I face a real person, I would be nervous. But if it is a machine, I can speak whatever I want. So, it's easier." This low-stakes environment became a rare space where mistakes felt safe rather than shameful.

Theme 2: The Primary Barrier: The "Quiet Paradox" and the Acoustic Privacy Crisis

The open-plan layout created a powerful irony: the quieter the room, the louder any spoken English felt. Participant J explained, "I don't think I can speak loudly in such a quiet space if I speak loudly, I will be embarrassing." Participant C connected this directly to accent anxiety: "I'm afraid to speak out. I'm afraid that I have some accent, and others may laugh at me." Multiple students described starting a speaking exercise and then immediately stopping when they noticed side glances or peers removing headphones. Participant T's suggestion: "soundproof single rooms like in the library" was echoed by more than two-thirds of participants, often with visible frustration.

Theme 3: The Motivation Gap: Extrinsic Mandates and Institutional Invisibility

Engagement was overwhelmingly extrinsic, driven by course requirements rather than intrinsic motivation. Participant L's testimony was stark: "I have come about 30 or 40 times just for a point. I only once came to the ELL because I wanted to." Engagement was overwhelmingly extrinsic. Compounding this was a severe awareness crisis; many first- and second-year students were simply unaware that the facility existed. Participant Q observed, "a lot of students even didn't know it exists." Without awareness and perceived relevance, the lab remained an obligation.

Theme 4: The Content Dilemma: Stagnation, Generic Design, and the Need for Personalization

Repeat users quickly encounter the limits of a static, nonpersonalized repository. Participant L complained, "they never update the resources… I always watch the same video." More critically, the software felt impersonal: "It's not… specific for you, that designed for you, is not that" (Participant R). This lack of targeting and refreshment particularly alienated the Advanced Critic persona.

Theme 5: The Competitive Disadvantage: Physical Infrastructure in a Mobile-First World

Students consistently performed a pragmatic cost-benefit analysis against the convenience of personal mobile apps. Participant S summarized this view: "I think some apps I use on my phone or my computer are better." When the ELL's unique benefits (diagnostic feedback) were neutralized by its barriers (poor privacy, inconvenience, stale content), the convenience of alternatives became decisive. This competition highlights a critical challenge for physical learning infrastructure. Table 1 presents the "student calculus" that emerged across interviews.

Table 1. Student Calculus: ELL vs. Mobile Learning Alternatives

Feature	English Language Lab (ELL)	Mobile/Personal App
Feedback Quality	High. Explicit, diagnostic, corrective.	Variable. Often simplistic (right/wrong).
Privacy	Low. Open-plan, anxiety-inducing.	High. Use anywhere, with headphones.
Convenience	Low. Fixed location, limited hours.	High. 24/7 access, integrated into daily life.
Content Freshness	Low. Perceived as stagnant, nonupdated	High. Constant updates, algorithm-driven.
Personalization	Low. Generic, one-size-fits-all paths.	Medium-High. Adaptive learning common.
Primary Driver	Extrinsic (course mandates).	Intrinsic/convenience

Note. N=22 domestic Chinese undergraduates

Synthesis: Emergent Learner Personas and Strategic Implications
The five themes segment users into three clear personas, each with distinct unmet needs and student-generated solutions (see Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of Themes, Affected Learner Personas, and Student-Generated Recommendations

Theme	Core Barrier	Most Affected Persona	Student-Proposed Solution
Diagnostic feedback & safe practice	None (perceived strength)	All three personas	Retain and prominently advertise explicit ASR feedback
Privacy & accent anxiety	Open-plan acoustics; fear of peer judgment	Anxious beginner	Install soundproof single-person booths
Awareness & extrinsic motivation	Poor promotion; course mandates only	Test-prepper	Targeted WeChat campaigns and prize contests
Outdated & generic content	Rarely updated materials	Advanced Critic	Regular content refresh + advanced modules
Competition from mobile apps	Inconvenience outweighs benefits	All three personas	Hybrid model (link lab accounts to popular apps)

Note. ASR=automatic speech recognition.

Conclusion of Findings
In sum, the ELL is trapped in a self-reinforcing cycle of constrained utility. Its unique value proposition, explicit diagnostic feedback in a low-anxiety setting, is systematically neutralized by an anxiety-inducing physical environment, institutional invisibility, stagnant content, and the superior convenience of mobile alternatives. These barriers do not affect users uniformly; they segment the student population into identifiable personas with distinct, actionable needs, providing administrators with a clear, user-centered roadmap for transformation.

DISCUSSION

The findings empirically validate the "infrastructure hiatus" proposed in the literature review. Just as Hu and Lei (2014) documented a persistent gap between

ambitious EMI policy and compromised classroom practice, this study reveals an analogous disjuncture between substantial lab investment and near-zero voluntary student engagement. The underuse of the English Language Lab (ELL) is not a simple failure of technology or learner motivation but a systemic misalignment between institutional design and the psychological, cultural, and practical realities of domestic Chinese undergraduates in a transnational EMI context.

Students' enthusiastic valuation of "machine-corrected" feedback and the dramatic reduction in anxiety when speaking to a computer rather than a person constitute powerful empirical support for the affective affordances of technology that are too often absent in physical learning environments (Ahmed, 2024). The "quiet paradox," an open-plan lab built for speech that actively inhibits it, represents a profound design failure that exacerbates the very foreign-language speaking anxiety the facility should remedy (Horwitz et al., 1986). Unlike Western CALL contexts that often assume learner autonomy as a given (Levy, 2009), the East Asian IBC context reveals privacy as a nonnegotiable prerequisite. This finding aligns with emerging evidence on the reciprocity between environment and motivation in language learning (Hang et al., 2025) and constitutes a critical failure of the inclusive physical-digital design repeatedly called for in recent scholarship (Öztürk & Küçükaydın, 2025; Tafazoli et al., 2025).

While privacy is the most immediate trigger, a deeper analysis of student accounts suggests that the anxiety experienced in the ELL is not an isolated phenomenon. Instead, it amplifies a broader spectrum of vulnerabilities inherent to the EFL learning experience, rooted in classroom socialization, developmental self-consciousness, and linguistically specific stigma. For instance, similar fears of judgment appear in classroom settings, where real-time interactions heighten vulnerability, a recurring point in our data as students contrasted the "safer" but still public ELL with the even more exposed environment of the oral English classroom (Horwitz et al., 1986; Mak, 2011). Such findings suggest that the ELL fails to provide the psychological safety it was designed to offer, merely trading one form of social evaluative pressure for another. Linguistic factors, such as the internalized stigma surrounding a "Chinese accent" mentioned by several participants, further amplify this anxiety, resonating with Spencer-Oatey and Dauber's (2017) work on "face" and indicating that relatedness is thwarted not only by the presence of peers but also by the anticipation of their judgment on a deeply personal aspect of identity. Beyond its impact on anxiety, the open layout introduces a distinct cognitive challenge. The auditory distraction of hearing peers practice, described by students as a barrier to concentration, directly undermines the focus required for effective language practice. This point, while underexplored in the lab-design literature, emerged clearly in student accounts and represents another critical dimension of the space's failure.

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020) provides the most coherent explanatory framework. The ELL reliably satisfies competence through explicit, machine-delivered corrective feedback (Theme 1), a mechanism that recent meta-analytic evidence shows yields the most significant pronunciation gains (Thi-Nhu Ngo et al., 2024). However, the same facility

systematically undermines relatedness (Theme 2) and autonomy (Theme 4). The open-plan "quiet paradox" transforms a space intended for speaking practice into one that intensifies culturally rooted fears of "losing face" and peer judgment (Theme 2) (Horwitz et al., 1986; Mak, 2011; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017). Generic, rarely updated, and nonpersonalized content further erodes autonomy (Theme 4). This "perfect storm" pushes engagement toward purely extrinsic course mandates (Theme 3), a pattern repeatedly documented across resource-constrained Global South settings (Akpan et al., 2024; Nazeer et al., 2024; Sabudu et al., 2021). Similar patterns of social disengagement among domestic students have been observed in other EMI contexts; for instance, Volkova and Kolesov (2022) reported that Russian domestic students in an EMI university prioritized academic performance and avoided university social life due to heavy study loads and a cultural emphasis on academic success, mirroring the extrinsic, mandate-driven engagement seen in the present study.

The near-total reliance on extrinsic motivation directly reflects SDT's prediction: when relatedness and autonomy needs remain unmet, only external regulation sustains behavior. The student calculus favoring mobile apps (Theme 5, Table 1) crystallizes the competitive disadvantage: when privacy, convenience, and freshness are absent, even superior explicit feedback loses out to pedagogically shallower alternatives. This persistent "infrastructure hiatus" helps explain stubbornly high dropout and disengagement rates linked to EMI language pressure in Asian IBCs (Noman et al., 2023). Ren and Wang (2021) similarly found that domestic Chinese university students with less diverse socialization experiences tended to view internationalization primarily through personal or national gains (e.g., career competitiveness), aligning with the extrinsic, mandate-driven engagement observed here, while those with more diverse interactions developed broader ethical and global perspectives, suggesting that targeted promotional and social integration efforts in IBCs could foster more intrinsic motivation.

This study extends self-determination theory beyond its traditional application in classrooms and fully online environments to the underexamined domain of physical-digital hybrid self-access spaces. It demonstrates that competence-enhancing technologies (explicit ASR feedback) can coexist with design features that thwart relatedness and autonomy, leading to a theoretically predictable collapse into extrinsic-only motivation. More importantly, it reveals privacy as a culturally mediated prerequisite for relatedness in East Asian transnational contexts, a finding that challenges Western-centric assumptions in much CALL scholarship (Levy, 2009) and aligns with emerging reciprocity models of environment and motivation (Hang et al., 2025). The "quiet paradox" documented here thus constitutes a new, context-specific barrier worthy of inclusion in future theoretical models of technology-mediated language learning in the Global South.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations temper the generalizability of these findings. First, the study was conducted at a single Sino-American IBC. At the same time, the themes

resonate with broader EMI challenges in Asia; institutional variations (e.g., lab size, software, staffing) may moderate their intensity. Second, the data rely on self-reported perceptions rather than direct observation or longitudinal usage logs, which introduces potential recall bias. Third, the sample, although purposive, consists solely of first- and second-year students; upper-year perspectives might reveal different patterns of adaptation or disengagement.

Future research should adopt multisite, longitudinal designs that combine qualitative interviews with usage analytics and pre/and postpronunciation measures to track whether privacy-first redesigns actually increase voluntary attendance and skill gains. Comparative studies across different transnational partnerships (Sino-British, Sino-Australian, etc.) would clarify the extent to which cultural expectations of "face" versus institutional design drive the observed barriers. Finally, experimental interventions testing the three-phase roadmap proposed here, particularly the installation of soundproof booths and AI-driven personalization, would provide causal evidence of their impact on both psychological needs satisfaction and measurable speaking outcomes.

Conclusion and Practical Recommendations

Students do not reject the English Language Laboratory's potential; they reject its current, poorly optimized iteration. Emergent personas: The Anxious Beginner, Instrumental Test-Prepper, and Advanced Critic provide a clear, user-centered blueprint for transformation. To convert chronic underuse into sustained engagement, administrators must shift from a "build it, and they will come" model to one of continuous, evidence-informed codesign. We propose an evidence-aligned, student-generated three-phase actionable roadmap:

Phase 1: Address the Foundational Barrier (Immediate).

The university can install 8–10 soundproof practice booths, directly responding to the most frequently cited student "ask." This single change would directly satisfy the need for relatedness by creating a judgment-free zone, unlocking the lab's core function for anxious learners, and aligning with the priority of privacy in East Asian learning contexts.

Phase 2: Enhance Relevance and Motivation (Short Term).

The English Language Laboratory can launch a targeted promotional campaign on platforms such as WeChat, built around the affective promise of "No Judgment, Just Improvement," to solve the awareness crisis. It can also implement an AI-based diagnostic onboarding system to create personalized learning pathways, drawing on principles of culturally responsive pedagogy that value diverse student backgrounds and foster safe, inclusive environments (Bi, 2025). Such an intervention addresses the autonomy gap by moving from generic content to tailored practice, catering to both Test-Preppers and Advanced Critics.

Phase 3: Integrate and Innovate (Ongoing).

The English Language Laboratory can develop a hybrid model that syncs lab software with popular mobile apps, acknowledging students' digital realities. Furthermore, embed ELL effectiveness audits into institutional EMI accreditation processes to ensure continuous alignment between policy, investment, and student experience.

By centering the voices of domestic Chinese undergraduates, an underrepresented constituency in international education scholarship, this study answers recent calls for culturally responsive, affective, and inclusive approaches to technology-mediated language support in the Global South. Transforming the ELL from a mandatory checkpoint into a sought-after sanctuary is more than operational improvement; it is a concrete act of linguistic justice, ensuring that transnational EMI finally empowers rather than alienates the nonnative voices it aims to serve.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

1. In what ways, if any, did Clear Pronunciation 1 or 2 support your listening or speaking skills?
2. Do you tend to use the ELL for listening, pronunciation, or something else?
3. What aspects of using EnglishCentral in the lab, if any, stood out to you as useful or enjoyable?
4. How did the lab setup, such as headsets or microphones, affect your experience, if at all?
5. What challenges, if any, did you encounter with the software or lab equipment?
6. In what ways, if any, did the lab experience influence your phonetics practice compared to
classroom learning?
7. What suggestions, if any, do you have to enhance the English Language Lab for students like you?

Author bios

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