

In memory of my father, Jian Wei

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by

Liping Wei

December, 2012

Should English Teachers in China Enact the Communicative Language Teaching
Approach?

A Narrative Inquiry into Chinese Students' English-using Experience in the U.S.

A Dissertation Presented to the
Faculty of the College of Education
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

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If my father is watching me in the heaven, I want to tell him, “Father, I miss you. In the tenth year after you left, is there a better gift your daughter can give you than her dissertation to commemorate the past ten years?”

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Abstract

As one of the most popular language teaching approaches established in ESL (English as a Second Language) countries, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has encountered many challenges when introduced and implemented in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts, as demonstrated by a review of approximately 50 previous works pertaining to CLT and various facets of its application in EFL countries and in China's EFL contexts in particular. Questions have arisen concerning whether CLT should be enacted in China's EFL classrooms. Employing narrative inquiry, this dissertation investigates the English as a second language practices of four participants from China in the U.S., in the hope of shedding some light on whether China's English language teachers should enact CLT or not. Focusing on exploring and addressing the communicative difficulties encountered by the participants in the U.S., this narrative inquiry presents how inadequate command of English skills especially communicative competence affects the participants' academic learning and non-academic aspects of life. The lack of English communicative competence is identified as one of the biggest barriers preventing them from achieving a greater academic success and integrating into the American life. It is clearly shown that China's traditional English language teaching methods characterized by grammatical analysis, translation, and intensive reading

contributes to anything but students' communicative competence. The participants' perceived need for communicative competence explicitly underlines a vital call for enacting the Communicative Language Teaching approach in China's EFL classrooms. While gaining valuable insights regarding how to improve China's English language teaching from the perspective of Chinese students in the U.S., this narrative inquiry provides important implications for the educational institutions in the host countries in an endeavor to help international students become more linguistically proficient as well as socio-culturally empowered. Although this research is conducted with Chinese participants targeted at China's contexts, it has the potential to transcend national boundaries and spark global concerns, as "it opens the door for researchers in other nations to begin to explore a similar phenomenon in their national contexts" (Clandinin & Hamilton, 2010, p. 1115).

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Chapter 1 Introduction

This chapter starts with my personal inquiry as a non-native English language learner as well as a former English as a foreign language teacher. The rationale is mainly drawn from Clandinin and Connelly (1994) that “(e)xperience is the starting point and key term for all social science inquiry” (p. 425). It is my previous English language learning and teaching experience that has shaped who I am as an educator of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and brought to light what motivates me to undertake this study. After my personal narrative, the purpose of the study and the significance of the study naturally emerge.

Personal Narrative

My English language learning experience.

In the 1990s, I started learning English in Grade 7, the first year of middle school, along with my other peers in China. My parents were very strict with me concerning my academic study. From a very early age, I was aware of the great expectations my parents held for my academic success. I never let them down.

Self-disciplined, hard-working, and meticulous, I was always a top student, and never questioned my English language learning outcomes until I went to college and began to study English as my major. For the first time, I realized that, despite all the vocabulary, language patterns and structures committed to memory over the past years, it was hard for me to speak out a single fluent and grammatically correct sentence! That deeply-felt frustration and realization are things I will never forget in my lifetime.

Since then, I have begun to think retrospectively about my previous English learning experience, and found it brimming with all the moments of remembering new

words and grammatical points one after another, a lot of which would be rarely used in real life. While being taught discrete language points and tested on the mastery of them, we were seldom provided with the opportunities of practicing them in different contexts so as to transform them into our own discourses. Neither did we think about how capable we were in demonstrating appropriate communicative behavior using English. I realized that I had been learning about English, rather than learning English.

My English language teaching philosophy.

My English language learning experience has, in turn, affected my English teaching philosophy deeply. It fundamentally shaped my philosophical assumptions underlying foreign language teaching and learning, and made me a firm supporter of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

Owing to my English language learning experience, I began to ponder the nature and goals of foreign language teaching and learning, the respective roles and responsibilities of teachers and students, the learning strategies encouraged, and the qualities valued, and found my teaching philosophy greatly in accord with the central tenets of CLT. I believed, in many aims for learning a foreign language, to be able to use the language effectively for real communicative needs should always be among the most important. Learning a language involves more than learning a set of phonological, lexical, and grammatical rules; the development of communicative competence in the target language is the principal and ultimate goal of language teaching and learning. I hoped what students could gain from me was not only the language itself, but also how to use the language, and the ways of learning the language so that they could continue to acquire it on their own after the course has ended.

My English language teaching practice.

From the first day of becoming an English teacher, I endeavored to exercise CLT, in order to prevent my regrettable situation recurring for my students. Avoiding explicit grammar instruction, I tried to create a relaxing classroom atmosphere in which students could feel motivated and free to engage in communicative activities, such as group discussions, presentations, and role plays, from which, communicative competence was expected to emerge naturally. Meanwhile, I paid special attention to making my feedback provided to students positive and encouraging. As long as their errors did not interfere with comprehension, I tried not to point out and correct. In this way, I intended to internalize an important concept into students that I attached greater value to free communication than the composition of error-free and sophisticated sentences.

Ambitious as I was in putting CLT into practice, many setbacks were experienced before long. The first was the very limited freedom for seeking out the teaching practice I perceived as best for students. Obligated to follow the syllabus, textbooks, and examinations all top-down pre-specified, I had little autonomy with regard to the decision-making of both curriculum and instruction, let alone the room allowed to negotiate with students. Under the pressure of helping students pass the university exams and the nation-wide CET (College English Test) Band 4 and Band 6, I had to spend a considerable portion of class time teaching the textbook, working on the language points at sentence and vocabulary level, investing a lot of energy in reading comprehension, all indispensable for students to be able to perform well on tests, yet contributing little, if not nothing, to the development of students' communicative competence. I felt a conflict between executing the assigned teaching tasks and conducting what I really wanted to do

in my classroom— stimulating students' interest in learning English and improving their communicative competence. Trying to accommodate both was no easy task.

Another tension arose between the teacher role advocated by CLT and that traditionally established in Chinese culture. In China, teachers are generally viewed as knowledge transmitters, that is, curriculum implementers (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992), or vessels through which knowledge is absolutely passed. I attempted to distance myself from projecting such an authoritative image, but instead pushed students to the forefront of the learning process by virtue of encouraging them to take the initiative and responsibility for their learning. However, students did not respond favorably to it. They seemed ill at ease with it. Having been accustomed with the teacher-centered classroom, they took it as a problem on the part of the teacher for making their classroom lack information, discipline, and rigor.

Moreover, students largely did not have intrinsic motivation to improve their practical language skills. The major reason may be the lack of genuine communicative needs in China's contexts which made them see few practical benefits of developing communicative competence. Given this circumstance, students learned English primarily motivated by a desire to progress in their academic studies and future careers. How to score high on tests was more instrumental and appealing for them. For the communicative activities I asked them to participate in, they appeared quite silent and passive, and offered little response.

Apart from the lack of student motivation, the large classroom size was another obstacle to the implementation of communicative activities. In a 90-minute class of 50 to 60 students, the total amount of speaking time per student was less than two minutes, and

the feedback to students was very limited, too, and most likely, insufficient to promote interaction that was conducive to language acquisition. To maximize the speaking time, I tried to organize paired or small group conversations as often as possible. Nevertheless, it was still hard to ensure that students were offered equal opportunities. Plus, the marked difference in students' oral proficiency levels made it even more difficult to conduct communicative activities. I always wished I had a chance to see how CLT could be conducted successfully with low-motivated students and large classes.

Embarrassingly as it was, the last but not the least issue was: I had to admit that my oral English was not proficient enough to allow me to teach as communicatively as I wished. I found I was more comfortable explaining language points than making spontaneous responses and facilitating free interaction. CLT posed too large a teaching challenge to my English proficiency.

Purpose of the Study

Cognizant of all the above difficulties in using CLT, I began to experience doubts regarding the adoption of CLT within the situation in which I taught. I became uncertain whether I should persist in CLT or revert to traditional teaching approaches. On the one hand, following CLT, the once firmly felt conviction, was becoming uncertain in front of the various external factors; on the other hand, the significance of CLT made me unwilling to reconcile myself to whatever pedagogies were more easily applicable. This gave added urgency for me to examine whether CLT, a language teaching approach originated and nurtured in ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts should be enacted in China, an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) country.

As one of the most predominant language teaching approaches, CLT has developed and expanded for over 30 years since its initial appearance in ESL countries in the 1970s. I learned that I was not alone in attempting to enact CLT in EFL contexts; many EFL educators and researchers have made great efforts in exploring the application of CLT in EFL countries, including China (Criado & Sanchez, 2009; Eisenclas, 2010; Feryok, 2008; Hiep, 2007; Hu, 2005a).

To address the query whether English teachers in China really should enact CLT, I will, first of all, make a comprehensive and thorough review of the literature pertaining to CLT, including its origin, development, and features, and various facets of its application in EFL countries, especially in China. A prospect for the future research will be envisioned based upon the findings of a review of approximately 50 previous works. As problem is identified and research question is formulated and refined, methodology will be laid out in Chapter 3 to guide the investigation. Discussions and conclusions will be presented respectively in subsequent chapters.

Significance of the Study

As the world's lingua franca, English is being learned by more and more people globally. By conservative estimates, the number of non-native speakers of English in the world today outnumbers native speakers by more than two to one, and the ratio is increasing (Crystal, 2003). This means, with the trend of growing globalization, teaching English to speakers of other languages has been more and more indispensable and significant. China has the largest English-learning and -using population among all the EFL countries, with an estimated figure between 440 to 650 million (See He & Zhang, 2010). This topic, though mainly out of my personal inquiry, is of significance for the

English language education not only in China but also in many other EFL countries across the world.

EFL vs. ESL

In recent decades, a set of bewildering terms have appeared successively to address the differentiated categories of English teaching, such as EAL, English as an Auxiliary Language; EIAL, English as an International-Auxiliary Language; ELWC, English as a Language of Wider Communication; EIL, English as an International Language. More often than differentiation and clarification, these terms have tended to result in ambiguity and confusion, even among scholars in academia. In fact, the terms with the most utility and clarity are EFL and ESL, which are also the most commonly used historically.

As a major world language, in addition to being spoken as a native language by many throughout the world, English is acquired as a second language by a greater number of people, and learned as a foreign language by a considerably larger population. The basic difference between EFL (English as a foreign language) and ESL (English as a second language) lies in the language environment in which the non-native speakers learn English (Judd, 2007). A non-native English speaker who studies English in an environment where the majority population speaks a language other than English is studying EFL, whereas, if the majority population speaks English, he/she is studying ESL. In EFL contexts, classroom is the predominant source of learning English. Exposure to English and using English for any purpose outside the classroom are very limited. In contrast, in ESL contexts, non-native speakers communicate primarily in English, thereby

all language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—can be practiced in a variety of registers when using English to meet a variety of demands.

Implementation vs. Enactment

Three major perspectives have been generally conceived as underpinning how teachers approach curriculum. One is fidelity approach, which, as the name suggests, means the adoption of stipulated curriculum faithfully; the second one is adaptation approach, which indicates the undertaking of curriculum adjustments; and the third one is enactment approach, which means teachers create curriculum on the authority of their knowledge (Shawer, 2009; Synder, Bolin, & Zumwalt, 1992). This study, on the one hand, follows the line of the three approaches to curriculum, and on the other hand, breaks off this confine and makes a clear distinction between implementation and enactment.

In this dissertation, “implementation” is understood as what happens when teachers dutifully perform what is prescribed, while “enactment” is when “curriculum is shaped through the evolving constructs of teachers and students” (Snyder, Bolin, & Zumwalt 1992, p. 404). Both of the terms can travel back to the fidelity perspective and enactment perspective to curriculum respectively. Compared with “implementation,” “enactment” pinpoints teacher-level and classroom-level, that is, how the curriculum is actually enacted by teachers in the classroom. This dissertation focuses on “enactment” of CLT, a pedagogical innovation, as it is experienced by teachers and students as it gets acted out in classroom practice.

Summary

Through storying and restorying my previous English language learning and teaching experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), I presented how I became a strong advocate of the Communicative Language Teaching approach in this chapter, and how my belief in it began to vacillate because of the challenges encountered in enacting it in classrooms with flesh-and-blood students. The question driving this research naturally emerged: Whether China's English teachers should enact the Communicative Language Teaching approach. The significance of the research was also elucidated. To facilitate the review of the related literature as well as the whole study, two key terms were clarified at the end of the chapter, that is, EFL as opposed to ESL. The next chapter, Chapter 2, will review approximately 50 previous works pertaining to the Communicative Language Teaching approach and various facets of its application in EFL countries and in China's EFL contexts in particular.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

What is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)?

Communicative Language Teaching is a language teaching approach that can be traced back to the early 1970s and still prevails today, even to the point that the term “communicative language teaching” has become a common word among language teachers (Brown, 2009). This section will start by providing a brief introduction to all the language teaching approaches that were once popular or still remain the working pedagogic paradigms in the profession today, and then examine the emergence and evolution of CLT in the past few decades by investigating the linguistic development of the nature of language and language acquisition as well as the core concept of CLT—“communicative competence.” On this basis, six fundamental features of CLT will be expounded, and the misconceptions of CLT will be scrutinized.

An outline of language teaching approaches.

“As schools of thought have come and gone, so have language teaching methods waxed and waned in popularity,” according to Brown (2009, p. 68). Each new method develops from the old, and at the same time inherits some of the advisable aspects of the old. It is hoped that an overview of all the major language teaching approaches will help bring forward where CLT stands in a historical light.

Celce-Murcia (2007) surveyed the historical development of pre-Twentieth-Century trends and outlined nine major Twentieth-Century approaches in which communicative language teaching is among the most recent ones. The other eight approaches are (a) grammar-translation approach, (b) direct approach, (c) reading approach, (d) audiolingualism, (e) oral-situational approach, (f) cognitive approach, (g)

affective-humanistic approach, and (h) comprehension-based approach (Celce-Murcia, 2007). Davies and Pearse (2000) categorized all the main approaches into (a) grammar-translation approach, (b) direct approach, (c) situational language teaching, (d) audiolingual approach, (e) total physical response, (f) the silent way, (g) suggestopedia, (h) community language teaching, (i) the natural approach, (j) communicative language teaching, and (k) course design approach. Though opinions vary slightly regarding its classification and denomination, some dominant ones are universally recognized.

Grammar-translation approach.

As the name suggests, grammatical analysis and translation exercise constitute the major part of this approach. The teacher's role is to explain the meaning of words and grammar rules, organize practice, and correct students' mistakes. Instruction is mainly given in students' native language. Memorization and rote learning of vocabulary and grammatical patterns are students' major learning strategies. The result of this approach is usually an inability on the part of the students to use the language for communication.

Direct approach.

As a reaction to grammar-translation approach, direct approach emphasizes language as a system of oral communication. Language is believed to be learned best by hearing and imitating what is heard in different contexts. Texts are used for entertainment, not for grammatical analysis. Instruction is primarily given in the target language with the aid of actions and pictures to help meanings get across. The teacher, who is supposed to be a native speaker or have native-like proficiency in the target language, engages students in the lively discourses while students are supposed to listen carefully and

imitate as they participate. However, direct approach is weak in syllabus design and doesn't give due attention to the cultivation of reading and writing skill.

Situational approach.

Following direct approach that takes spoken language as the focal point, situational approach takes direct approach a step further by embedding discourses in specific situations. Language is learned in relation to the appropriateness under situations aside from linguistic correctness. The grammar content is organized in terms of sentence patterns, beginning with the ones thought to be the easiest, most common, and most useful. This approach is considered better preparation for the real use of the language than the production of situationally unrelated language structures.

Audiolingualism.

Dialogue repetition, memorization, drills, and mimicry are emphasized based on the assumption that language is habit formation. Pronunciation is stressed in dialogue practice. Drills are often uncontextualized manipulation of grammatical structures. Correct production by learners is required, and incorrect production is rectified instantly and firmly. Language is mostly taught without regard to the meaning or context.

Development of communicative language teaching (CLT).

Linguistic development of the nature of language and language acquisition.

All language teaching approaches “operate explicitly from a theory of language and beliefs or theories about how language is learned” (Richards & Rodgers, 2007, p. 146). In other words, every considerable progress of language teaching approaches is inseparable from the significant development in linguistics. Therefore, to uncover the

origin of CLT, it is necessary to start with looking at several landmark developments in the history of linguistics in terms of the nature of language and language acquisition.

Traditional linguists in the pre-20th century viewed language learning as the learning of orthodox grammars of Greek or Latin. Error-intolerant, it placed emphasis on literary excellence and written language. Language teaching adopted a teacher-centered grammar-translation approach, focusing on language rules and detailed explanation within the texts. Textbooks were mainly classic works of celebrated writers.

Structuralism, the linguistic school that predominated in the first half of the 20th Century, mostly inherited the traditional propositions of pre-20th century, although it provided the description of phonological system that aided teaching of pronunciation. It viewed language as a system of structurally related elements for the coding of meaning, and language acquisition was “generally defined in terms of grammatical units (clause, phrase, sentence) and grammatical operations (adding, shifting, joining elements)” (Richards & Rodgers, 2007, p. 147). Influenced by behaviorism, structuralism considered language learning as habit formation mainly through drills of grammatical patterns and structures.

In contrast to the view of learning languages as “habit formation,” Chomsky (1965) put forward transformation-generative grammar (TG grammar), seeing language as a system of innate rules, namely, human beings are born with knowledge of linguistic universals. Language acquisition happens when language learners compare their innate language systems with that of their native languages and modify their grammars constantly. Though the “deep structures,” “surface structures” and some transformational

rules can assist language teachers with the teaching of more complex syntactic structures, Chomsky's TG grammar still falls into structuralism.

The most significant linguistic development that exerted a great impact on the later appearance of CLT began with Halliday's systemic-functional linguistics (1976) which viewed language as an instrument used to perform various functions in social interaction rather than a system in isolation. For Halliday (1976), learning language is learning to make meaning. In order to be able to make meaning, one has to master a set of language functions which includes the ideational function, the interpersonal function and the textual function. For the first time, Halliday's systemic-functional linguistics began to view language as a vehicle for the expression of meaning in which the "meaning" refers to more semantic rather than grammatical; and for the first time, it began to consider the individual learner as a social being and investigated the way in which he or she acquired language and used it in order to communicate with others in his or her social environment.

As the views of the nature of language evolved from the initial self-contained system of structurally related elements to an instrument of performing various functions, and to a vehicle for the realization of interpersonal relations and for the performance of social transactions between individuals, people gradually realized the inadequacy of traditional teaching approaches, such as audiolingualism and grammar-translation, in preparing students for engagement in interactive negotiation of meaning. Cries for a teaching approach that addresses students' ability to produce the right thing at the right time echoed in ESL countries, and these cries precipitated CLT.

Communicative competence.

Chomsky (1965) was the one who proposed the concept of “competence” for the first time, as opposed to ‘performance,’ which constitutes a fundamental distinction in linguistics. “Competence” is a language user’s underlying knowledge about the system of rules, and “performance” refers to the actual use of language in concrete situations (Chomsky, 1965). Put it differently, “competence” can be understood as what a speaker can do under the best conditions, and “performance” as what he/she actually does. As is well known that our performance seldom matches our competence, this reveals a very important lesson for language teaching: the ability to produce and comprehend the language or languages is not the same as the ability to use the conventional or standard forms of the languages, we should try to disclose students’ real competence and help reduce the discrepancy between their competence and performance. However, the assumption underlying Chomsky’s conceptualization is the thinking that “linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly” (Chomsky, 1965, p. 3).

Chomsky not only made an important distinction between competence and performance, but he also worked a lot on grammatical competence/linguistic competence which was focused on the syntactic, lexical, morphological, and phonological features of the language, formalistic, and context free. Rejecting Chomsky’s notion of linguistic competence as insufficient to account for the complex nature of language, linguists tried to expand on the concept of “competence” to include not just the ability to understand

and produce grammatically accurate utterances but also to communicate in ways that are contextually appropriate.

Against this background, Hymes (1971) posited “communicative competence,” in which CLT has its roots. Hymes defined it as “the ability to use linguistic knowledge of language appropriately in a variety of social situations” (Hymes, 1979, p. 3). It involves four components: possibility, the ability to produce grammatical sentences; feasibility, the ability to produce sentences which can be decoded by the human brain; appropriateness, the ability to use correct forms of language in a specific socio-cultural context; and performance, the fact that the utterance is completed (Hymes, 1971).

Savignon, one of the first theorists to apply Hymes’ concept of communicative competence to language learning, defined communicative competence as “the ability to function in a truly communicative setting” (Savignon, 1972, p. 8).

The most influential definition of communicative competence was developed by Canale and Swain in 1980 which identified four dimensions of it—grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). The first and foremost competence is grammatical competence, the native speakers’ knowledge of the syntactic, lexical, morphological, and phonological features of the language, and the capacity to manipulate these features to produce accurate words and sentences. Sociolinguistic competence is the competence of using language appropriately in different social contexts embedding the norms, values, beliefs, and behavior patterns of a culture. Discourse competence is the competence of connecting a series of sentences or utterances to form a meaningful whole in context. Strategic competence is the competence of keeping communicative channel open in an authentic communicative

situation in spite of kinds of factors that limit the application of linguistic rules (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Actually, the proposition of CLT can find an echo in Krashen's proposal of comprehensible input-based approach (Krashen, 1981). Combining "Comprehension Hypothesis" and the "Affective Filter Hypothesis," it contends that "(w)e acquire language when we receive comprehensible input in a low anxiety situation," rather than "by learning about language, by study of the rules and by memorizing vocabulary" (Krashen, 2003, p. 3). The stress on rich input and free anxiety is exactly for developing communicative competence.

In general, Hymes' views of language from a socio-cultural perspective with the aim of studying the varieties of ways of language on the part of the individual and the community laid a theoretical foundation for the evolution of CLT. Communicative competence, the ability to produce contextually appropriate language, is the overarching goal of language teaching and learning for CLT.

However, the voices regarding communicative competence are not all positive. Alptekin (2002) questioned the validity of the native-speaker based notion of communicative competence, considering the standardized native-speaker norms of competence in the target language setting to be utopian, unrealistic, and constraining. He called for the need for a new pedagogic model of English in the context of English as an international language, and allowed us a radical rethinking of communicative competence: Is native speakership a linguistic myth? Does it conflict with the pedagogical realities of most classrooms? Is it a feasible aim of language instruction (Alptekin, 2002)?

Fundamental characteristics of CLT.

CLT has been interpreted and applied with great variety (Criado & Sanchez, 2009). Though no single model of CLT has been universally accepted as authoritative up to now, some salient features of CLT do exist that distinguish it from other language teaching approaches. Hu (2005b) summed up these features very well:

While there are different versions of CLT, most CLT-based classrooms are characterized by (1) use of collaborative learning activities such as group and pair work that require interaction in the target language among learners to pool information and to solve problems; (2) maximization of learners' exposure to, and use of, the target language through communicative activities (bearing some relationship with real-world activities); (3) use of real language samples and tasks bearing some relationship with real-world activities to provide opportunities for learners to learn language in contexts; and (4) learner-centered instruction that not only takes into account learners' backgrounds, language needs, and goals but also allows them some role and creativity in pedagogical decision making. (Hu, 2005b, p. 154)

However, there are still some important characteristics not yet covered or explicitly stated. Based upon the previous works, I categorized the characteristics of CLT into the following six groups. It is these features that not only help CLT stand out from a multitude of language teaching approaches, but also present serious challenges to the language teachers and researchers facing a variety of language teaching contexts in EFL countries.

Communicative classroom activities.

Students learn the language primarily through communicative activities that are designed to engage students in authentic, pragmatic, and interactive use of language (e.g., games, role plays, information-gap exercises, problem-solving tasks, and other activities). Communicative competence will emerge naturally from practice in such communicative interaction through communicative activities. Meanwhile, all the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—are supposed to be addressed in an integrated way.

In CLT classrooms, pair work and small group activities are the most common types of activities which can best maximize learners' opportunities to practice the target language. An activity is not communicative in nature if nothing in it suggests that students genuinely need to communicate instead of performing only because they have been asked to do so. Therefore, communicative activities must have meaningful purposes, such as achieving a specific aim which can only be realized through communication with each other. Gatbonton and Segalowitz (2005) stated two criteria to rate the "genuineness" of communicative activities: New information must pass from one interlocutor to the other, and the solicited information must be crucial for the continuation of the assigned task. All communicative activities should develop within relevant and adequate communicative contexts. Eisenclas (2010) contended that "(r)egardless of the variety of communicative activities in the classroom, the purpose remains to prepare learners for a world in which learners will depend for the development and maintenance of their communicative competence once classes are over" (p. 20).

Learner-centered.

Different from traditional language teaching approaches in which teachers take a dominant role, CLT is learner-centered. As the language instruction shifted its perspective from linguistic form to meaning with the advent of CLT, the focus on language was also shifted to learners, viewed as active and creative language users. CLT holds that learning is most likely to happen when classroom practices are made real and meaningful, and learners can learn best if the learning atmosphere is fun, stimulating, and stress-free. Therefore, learners are encouraged to take the initiative to participate actively in a wide range of communicative activities, whereas teachers' responsibility is to provide enough opportunities for students to practice the target language.

Since individual learners possess unique interests, learning styles, needs, and goals, and all should be addressed in CLT curriculum and instruction, there is not a universal version available for teachers to directly pick up and use in the classroom. It is learners' communicative needs that serve as a conductor's baton in implementing CLT in every aspect of teaching. If a given context of learning and students' needs are not considered, this approach can not be considered properly used.

Teachers as facilitators.

In CLT approach, teachers are generally viewed as facilitators, facilitating teacher-learner and learner-learner classroom interaction; and need analysts, assessing students' needs constantly and making adjustments accordingly. This doesn't mean that teachers' traditional role as knowledge providers is nonexistent at all; instead, it takes the form of resource provider, providing "the targeted utterances at the moment of need" (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005, p.28). It is also teachers' responsibility to create a class

atmosphere that makes students feel secure, unthreatened, uninhibited, and non-defensive while using English to fulfill class activities. This is an excellent model classroom “where confidence is built up, where mistakes can be made without fear, where learners can use the language without embarrassment, where all contributions are valued, and where activities lead to feelings of success, not failure”(Williams & Burden, 1997, p.66). To conclude, CLT requires teachers to move significantly beyond the teaching of grammatical rules, patterns and other knowledge *about* language to the point that they are able to teach students the knowledge of using language to communicate genuinely, spontaneously, and meaningfully.

Authentic teaching materials.

CLT requires that teaching materials should be authentic, which means it should represent the language as actually used by native speakers in real life, not produced specifically for language learning, so that students can respond to genuine communicative needs in realistic situations. They can be drawn from many different sources: video clips, recordings of authentic interactions, extracts from television, radio and newspaper, signs, maps and charts, photographs and pictures, timetables and schedules (Wang, 2000). Besides authenticity, teaching materials should be based on the analysis of students' uniqueness. Moreover, they should be intellectually stimulating, interesting and relevant to learners so as to arouse their interest in exploring the language material, because the end of the teaching materials should be students' desire to interpret, express, and negotiate.

Error toleration.

CLT classrooms encourage students to use the language in a meaningful way not necessarily in an accurate form. Error correction is infrequent or even absent. Making errors in CLT is considered as a natural outcome of learning process, rather than a sign of bad habits or unsuccessful learning that should be corrected immediately. Therefore, teachers should correct errors only on targeted utterances and ignore those non-targeted as long as comprehension is not impeded. This selective error-correction can help protect students' motivation, encourage them to engage in fluency-oriented communicative activities, and keep a particular class goal on track.

Fluency above accuracy.

In the light of CLT, successful communication doesn't mean making zero mistakes or understanding everything, because part of communicative competence is knowing how to keep the conversation going. In this sense, fluency is more important than accuracy. For teachers identified with CLT, the question that should be kept in mind and as a top priority is the following: At the end of a class, how many useful, reusable utterances students can produce fluently and appropriately, rather than how many flawless and sophisticated sentences students can compose?

Misconceptions of CLT.

One misconception of CLT is that it doesn't address grammar. CLT contends that formal elements of language should be secondary, subordinated to the attainment of communicative competence. Moreover, explicit instruction of grammar rules and the use of native language are not encouraged. Nevertheless, it doesn't mean that the syntactic and semantic knowledge is to be excluded. If the engagement in communicative activities

is seen as central to language development by CLT, it necessarily requires attention to form. No communication can take place in the absence of structure, or grammar, a set of shared assumptions about how language works (Savignon, 1991). The key is how to teach grammar. Many researchers have provided evidence that grammar learning achieves the most when it relates to students' communicative needs and experiences, and hence grammatical competence should be situated within a more broadly defined communicative competence (Hiep, 2007).

The second misconception is that CLT is exclusively concerned with the teaching of oral communication without paying attention to the other language skills. Many language educators in both theory and practice have reduced communication and CLT to “teaching only speaking and listening,” They assume that this approach mainly involves the development of the proficiency in speaking and listening, and other modes of interaction only serve to support the acquisition of speaking and listening ability. Actually, “communication” should not be envisaged as exclusively within one particular mode of interaction. Accordingly, CLT should not prioritise the oral above other communication skills, relegating reading and writing to the status of support activities to oral skills. As Canale and Swain (1980) pointed out in expounding what communicative competence means, “having communicative competence involves not only having a knowledge of the grammatical structure (grammatical competence), but knowing how and when to use these structures (strategic competence) in written and spoken discourse (discourse competence) and in a particular sociocultural context (sociolinguistic competence)” (cited from Eisenchias, 2010, p. 15). Therefore, CLT can be applied equally to the teaching of reading and writing (Savignon, 2007) as communicative

competence applies to both “written and spoken language, as well as to many other symbolic systems” (Savignon, 1997, p. 8).

Summary.

As illuminated above, despite the lack of theoretical cohesiveness in this field, there is still some consensus among scholars on the key theoretical tenets of CLT. All in all, though the complexity of CLT makes it difficult to offer a precise, short, and clear profile, with language as a tool for communication as the main rationale for CLT, all curriculum development, syllabus design, and classroom instruction should be centered on the development of learners’ communicative competence. The following statement made by Eisenclas (2010) concluded best what CLT is:

It is, strictly speaking, an approach rather than a “method,” and thus scholars aligned with CLT do not represent a single and united voice but include a number of perspectives embodying diverse goals and analyses that frequently disagree with one another. Common to all the strands within this paradigm, however, is the aim to “(a) make communicative competence the goal of language teaching; and (b) develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication.” (Eisenclas, 2010, p. 15)

CLT in EFL contexts

Despite the complexity of CLT, the “official curricula all over the world include CLT as the predominant method in foreign language teaching” (Criado & Sanchez, 2009, p. 4). Notwithstanding, the distinct features of EFL contexts as opposed to ESL determine that the implementation of CLT will not embark on the same path as in ESL contexts, as

much evidence provided by previous research has already demonstrated. Much literature has sprung up delving into the reasons responsible for the tough course CLT has undergone in EFL contexts.

A study conducted in Vietnam identified class size, grammar-based examinations, and lack of exposure to authentic language as constraints on using CLT (Ellis, 1994). Shamin (1996) identified learners' resistance, among other problems, as the barrier to her attempt to introduce innovative CLT approach in her Pakistan English classroom. A study of English teachers' perceived difficulties in adopting CLT in South Korea suggested that EFL countries like South Korea need to change their fundamental approach to education before CLT can be adopted, because "the predominance of text-centered and grammar-centered practices in Korea does not provide a basis for the student-centered, fluency-focused, and problem-solving activities required by CLT" (Li, 1998, p. 66). Chowdhury and Ha (2008) condemned CLT as methodological dogmatism, asserting that "Even though CLT claims to create a democratic classroom that is responsive to students' needs, it is often inappropriate and incompatible, neither sophisticated nor responsive enough for the complex educational needs and cultures of students in certain settings" (p. 305).

Another problem that cannot be neglected is students' different communicative needs. In ESL contexts where English language teaching takes place within an English-speaking environment, students have a far greater need to communicate and far more opportunities to practice and test out language skills in authentic situation, besides, a great deal of language acquisition can actually occur outside the classroom. Moreover, ESL teachers as native speakers act more as a facilitator, providing a more open forum

for communication in English. As a contrast, in EFL contexts, English learning is merely a part of school curriculum, restricted by teachers' language proficiency, the availability of teaching resources and materials, government curriculum and policy. For learners, the classroom is the primary provider of exposure to English. Without an English-speaking environment, motivation becomes more a product of curricular demands, pressure from exams, academic and professional success, instead of demand for communication. "The more the communicative needs, the more readily communicative methods seem to be adopted" (Savignon, 2007, p. 124), as Widdowson (1998) perceived, the English language teaching that takes communicative competence as the invariable goal does not fit in the EFL contexts where learners' engagement in social interaction with native English speakers is minimal.

Furthermore, some researchers focused on the varied cultural norms and educational practices in EFL countries that contradict those in ESL countries and therefore affect the pedagogical practices of CLT. For example, Chowdhury and Ha (2008) pointed out that in EFL countries, students see learning as a serious process in which knowledge is introduced and transmitted by teachers. Having fun with communicative activities in the language classroom tends to be perceived as not learning anything. Moreover, CLT's "principle of equal teacher-student status challenges the culturally endorsed hierarchical teacher-student relationship and the importance of showing respect to teachers in many countries, and thus faces resistance and unwelcome attitudes in those countries" (Chowdhury & Ha, 2008, p. 309).

In questioning the universal relevance of CLT in terms of the cultural conflicts arising from the introduction of the predominantly Western language teaching approach

to Asian cultures, Ellis (1994) suggested that we should concede there are some other ways of viewing educational philosophy and classroom practice which are incompatible with the principles of CLT. Hence, to make CLT suitable for Asian conditions, it needs to be culturally attuned to the local cultural norms.

Hiep (2007) aptly summed up the contextual factors restraining the implementation of CLT in EFL countries. He identified three groups of constraints:

- (a) systemic constraints, such as traditional examinations, large class sizes; (b) cultural constraints characterized by beliefs about teacher and student role, classroom relationships, and (c) personal constraints such as students' low motivation and unequal ability to take part in independent active learning practices, teachers' limited expertise in creating communicative activities like group work. (Hiep, 2007, p. 200)

Considering all the above constraints, and the gap between the contentions of CLT and the realities confronting EFL teaching and learning, some research studies maintained that EFL countries should carefully study their English teaching situations and decide how CLT can best serve their needs and interests (Feryok, 2007; Hu, 2010; McPherron, 2008). Some teachers and researchers opposed the obsession with CLT in an attempt to direct people's attention back to the value of traditional teaching approaches (Pan, 2008; Rao, 2002). A rather radical conception even ensued that viewed the promotion of CLT as an imposition of western superiority, associated with the cultural politics of English and English Language Teaching and embedded in the discourses of colonialism (Chowdhury & Ha, 2008, p. 308) In this fashion, a natural concern as the

result of CLT may be “the making of a group of learners indoctrinated in the discourse of the native speakers” (Chowdhury & Ha, 2008, p. 307).

There are some who argued for taking “context” into account, pointing out that the dominance of CLT has led to the neglect of one crucial aspect of language teaching—the context in which the pedagogy takes place (Hu, 2005a). Bax (2003) even appealed for the replacement of CLT as the central paradigm in language teaching with a Context Approach or an eclectic approach that places context at the heart of profession. He argued that methodology is not the sole solution; rather, there are many different ways to learn and teach languages; the crucial determiner is the context which includes students’ learning needs, wants, styles, strategies, course books, local conditions, the classroom culture, school culture, and national culture. The first priority of language teaching is to understand all the above key aspects of the context before deciding what and how to teach in any given class (Bax, 2003). Some went even further to assert that “the best approach” did not exist at all, because different teaching contexts asked for different approaches; therefore, an eclectic approach may well be the best way to deal with varied classrooms (Prabhu, 1990).

CLT in China

As in other EFL countries, CLT has provoked a great deal of deliberation and debate in China. In this section, a panorama of China’s English language education will be provided first, followed by the introduction and implementation of CLT in China, and the differing views around this issue will be explicated specifically.

An overview of China's English language education.

Development over the past few decades.

Since China initiated the policies of opening up and reform in the late 1970s, English language education has been increasingly given emphasis for its critical role to “meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges” (College English Curriculum Requirements [For Trial Implementation], 2004, p. 5). Actually, English language education has become part of China's reform and opening-up policies, and regarded as indispensable for providing access to the advanced knowledge of science and technology in the world to facilitate China's integration into the global economy, enhance its international competitiveness, and boost national invigoration.

Numerous policies have been promulgated by the Ministry of Education since the late 1970s to promote English language education throughout the entire educational system, such as the “Proposals for Enhancing Foreign Language Education” in 1979, the “Plan for University English Teacher Training” in 1980, the “College English Syllabus for Science and Technology Students” in 1985, the “College English Syllabus for Arts and Social Sciences Students” in 1986, the “English Curriculum Standards” for primary and secondary schools in 2001, the “Guidelines for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Teaching” in 2001, etc. (Feng, 2009).

With a series of policy efforts made and disseminated, China has witnessed the fastest growth in English language education in the last couple of decades. By 2002, all primary schools had started English provision from grade three. Through stipulating specific requirements for pronunciation, vocabulary, phrases, grammar, functional and notional inventories, the levels of English proficiency at different stages have been

standardized, and students have to meet the corresponding level to be promoted to the next stage of education. English, as one of the core subjects in the curriculum, is an examination subject in all levels of entrance exams, from high school entrance exam, college entrance exam, all the way to graduate entrance exam.

As China's economic prosperity and the increasing globalization keep infusing momentum to the development of English language education, the role and status of English in education and the society have reached unprecedented heights. The proficiency in English language is of paramount importance to not only china's modernization and participation in international activities, but also to individual learners' access to new socioeconomic opportunities. "The language is considered an essential skill for citizens employed in foreign trade, tourism, scientific and technological contexts, and is a prerequisite for those wishing to advance in life, either socially or professionally" (Wette & Barkhuizen, 2009, p. 197). Mastery of English is even taken as a basic requirement for citizens in the 21st century. The perceived high status of English has led to the greatest national campaign of learning English in China's history. Both students and parents tend to attach high value to English language learning, and devote a large amount of money and energy into it. Official statistics cited in Wen and Hu (2007) claimed that over 226 million students in primary and secondary schools and in universities are studying English under the instruction of 850 thousand English teachers.

Traditional English language teaching practice.

Traditionally, China's English language teaching is characterized by the following: concentration on intensive reading as a basis for language teaching content; a preoccupation with grammatical analysis and translation as the language teaching

approach; an emphasis on memorization and rote learning as a basic language acquisition technique; and overlook of communicative competence (Rao, 2002).

Many scholars have addressed China's traditional English language teaching (Wang & Gao, 2008; Wen & Hu, 2007; Li & Baldauf, 2011), and I summarize its main features as follows. Generally, teachers are viewed as an "authority," from whom students are supposed to learn "flawless" language, whereas students are taken as plants that passively wait to be fed with all they need in order to "grow," rather than encouraged to explore and create their own dialogues. Emphasis is placed on language form and accuracy instead of fluency. Teaching materials feature formal reading in the style of complex sentence structures and elevated literary wording, which for a large part is boring and irrelevant to the students' interests and real life. The emphasis on language form and test taking, though provides a base for the development of vocabulary and grammar, contributes little to the development of the competence of using the language for communication outside the classroom.

English language education at postsecondary level.

In College English Curriculum Requirements (For Trial Implementation) (2004), it is clearly stated that "College English, an integral part of higher learning, is a required basic course for undergraduate students" (p. 5). For all the non-English-major students in universities, they are required to complete a general English course which spans the first 2 years of their undergraduate period, and a specialized reading course in the third and/or fourth year which is aimed at training their ability of reading the information related to their specializations.

In most of the universities, undergraduate students are required to pass CET 4 (College English Test Band 4), and graduate students a higher level CET 6 (College English Test Band 6), which is one of the basic requirements for obtaining a baccalaureate and graduate degree respectively. Administered nation-wide twice a year, both of the tests are “internationally recognized, accuracy-oriented with reading (35%), listening (35%), vocabulary and grammar (15%), and guided writing (15%)” (Wette & Barkhuizen, 2009, p. 197). Since first administered in 1987, they have been nationally regarded as the key to personal and institutional success effecting increasingly sizable social impact. A pass at them is of significant importance to college students because they are not only linked with degrees but also recruitment criteria on the job market. Moreover, the passing rate concerns both English teachers and universities as an important indicator of the outcomes of English language instruction. Though subject to many criticisms, the tests have remained as popular and important as ever.

Introduction and implementation of CLT in China.

Policy decisions concerning CLT.

As early as 1979, China witnessed the initial tide of CLT that rose from the efforts of developing communication-oriented teaching materials by a team of pioneering CLT advocates. As the only Chinese scholar in this team, Li (1984) strongly committed herself to the adoption of CLT in China, though meanwhile foreseeing an uneven course CLT would undergo in China’s contexts. The call for the adoption of CLT was not accidental. It came as a response to the discontent with the traditional English language teaching approaches that were characterized by teacher-centered, grammar-based, and test-oriented (Yu, 2001). “Since the late 1980s, the official discourse on reforms of English-

language education has repeatedly attributed the low quality of English instruction to the traditional teaching methodologies and called for new pedagogical practice to improve the effectiveness of instruction” (as cited in Hu, 2005b, p. 153). Since the early 1990s, the policy makers have promoted CLT vigorously.

In 1991, “College English Syllabus” was disseminated by the Ministry of Education, purporting to herald a fundamental change in China’s English language teaching through setting the development of communicative competence as the pedagogic goal (College English Syllabus, 1991). It became a remarkable milestone in the history of English language education in China. A revised edition of it was issued in 1999, further highlighting the development of CLT nationwide (College English Syllabus, 1999). In 2004, “College English Curriculum Requirements (For Trial Implementation)” was issued by Ministry of Education as a national guideline for colleges and universities in formulating their own school-based curriculum in the light of specific circumstances, with “developing students' ability to use English in an all-round way, especially in listening and speaking” as the objective (College English Curriculum Requirements [For Trial Implementation], p. 5, 2004). Through this document, more freedom was given to individual institutions regarding the time allocated for English language instruction, textbooks selected, and assessment system (Feng, 2009). As a trial version, it was formally spread throughout the country until 2007, owing to which, a clear emphasis was made on the development of overall proficiency especially on oral communication rather than reading. In response to the nation’s cries for deepening college English teaching reform and meeting the needs of the country and society for qualified personnel in the new era, numerous textbooks and corresponding software have mushroomed, featuring

communicative tasks and the integration of the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing.

In 2005, the Ministry of Education adjusted the content of CET 4 and 6, the main testing tool of college students' English proficiency, to align with the "College English Curriculum Requirements" characterized by the development of communicative competence (College English Test Band 4 and Band 6 Reform Program [For Trial Implementation], 2005). Before this adjustment, the success in previous tests derived largely from the meticulous study of language details rather than the ability to communicate. This reform increased its emphasis on practical abilities by augmenting the proportion of listening, and adding fast reading and non-multiple-choice items for the first time. It also stipulated that students who score above 90% would be eligible to sit for a speaking test. The reformed tests ceased grading in three categories "fail," "pass," and "excellent," but issue a report of the score which is 710 in total.

From December 2008, CET 4 and 6 began taking computer-based form at 50 experimental universities around the nation, with 100 test-takers randomly picked out from each university. In June 2009, the number of experimental universities was expanded to 180. The computer-based CET 4 and 6 further increased the proportion of listening and added the section of "listen and read" to test students' pronunciation and intonation for the first time.

All these official actions indicate a pedagogical reorientation from the traditional grammar-translation and audiolingualism language teaching approaches to communicative language teaching approach. However, the intensive top-down promotion

of CLT has not produced expected results (Hu, 2005b). The following section will unfold the reasons.

The discrepancy between policy initiatives and teaching realities.

A study conducted with approximately 200 teachers from 130 Chinese universities in an in-service English language teacher education programme indicated that the vast majority of teachers expressed a preference for instruction that develops communicative competence, particularly in oral interaction (Wette & Barkhuizen, 2009). However, the fact is that the pedagogical practices in numerous classrooms do not seem to be much different from the past. “It has argued that, despite the espoused adoption of a communicative rhetoric, many of the practices implemented in classrooms are still guided by grammar-driven agendas” (Eisenchlas, 2010).

Many works have reported that CLT has undergone a tough time as teachers have attempted to live it in China (Li, 1997; McPherron, 2008; Sun & Cheng, 2002). Not only English language teachers, but also students, have professed a range of difficulties brought by CLT (Li, 2004; Rao, 2002; Tang, 2007). The first and foremost difficulty is that CLT makes too heavy demands on teachers who are not native speakers of English. Teachers “find themselves in the potentially awkward position of equipping their students with aspects of the native speaker’s sociolinguistic and strategic competence” which is not at their best (Alptekin, 2002, p. 62). Moreover, the lack of proper training in CLT, heavy workloads, excessive class size, and limited resources available all make the implementation of CLT “a rather daunting task” for teachers (Wu, 2001, p. 191). Also, students find themselves unaccustomed to CLT. Most students have virtually no real-life opportunities to practice their spoken English in genuinely communicative situations, and

therefore don't see the merits of CLT. In addition, as Eveyik-Aydin (2003) pointed out that Chinese students tend to associate the interactive classroom activities with entertainment only, they prefer traditional settings in which they can sit motionless and take notes, and avoid expressing their opinions in group and pair work for the fear of losing face or offending others.

Another difficulty stems from the lack of effective assessment instruments in alignment with CLT. The assessment of instructional outcomes of English has always been through the high-stakes tests, such as CET. Though the testing of communication skills has taken up an increasingly larger proportion, the focus is still largely on the discrete-point, structurally based knowledge about English as a linguistic system rather than the ability to use the language for communication.

Moreover, some researchers noted the influence of regional differences on the implementation of CLT (Feng, 2009; Hu, 2005b). Access to resources for English language learning can vary greatly from region to region. While CLT practices suffer impediment to the incorporation into classroom instruction in the well-equipped schools of the socio-economically developed areas, "the official espousal of the methodology has had virtually no effect on the classroom in the vast under-developed regions" (as cited in Hu, 2005b, p. 154). A great majority of teachers working in the rural inland areas do not have the English proficiency or sociolinguistic competence to implement CLT in their classrooms. Developing communicative competence for most students in the under-developed areas is simply an unattainable goal, if not for students in metropolis and other large cities.

In general, the constraints discouraging Chinese practitioners from implementing CLT can be summarized as follows: the clash between CLT and the traditional Chinese pedagogic norms, culture of learning, as well as the educational settings, the lack of English-speaking environment for social and vocational purposes, scarcity of authentic language materials, a shortage of supporting resources, teachers' lack of communicative competence and ability to execute CLT, students' not being accustomed to CLT and low motivation to use English to communicate, the regional variations in terms of policy implementation in classroom practices, the deficiency in an effective evaluation of the learning outcomes employing CLT, the nation-wide, test-oriented educational system (Hu, 2005b; Li, 2004; Li & Baldauf, 2011). Wette and Barkhuizen (2009) identified students' unwillingness to participate in classroom activities and lack of intrinsic motivation as the most frequently reported source of difficulty. Whereas, Yu (2001) deemed that the biggest constraint derived from English teachers' insufficient communicative language proficiency which was identified by Nunan (2003) as one of the most important qualifications of successful ESL/EFL teachers.

Differing views regarding CLT.

In spite of the tremendous gap between the policy initiatives and the real-world practices observed, there are still some teachers and researchers firmly advocating for the application of CLT in China. Yu (2001) optimistically proclaimed that owing to the highly centralized Chinese educational system, this top-down intervention proved to be very effective in urging teachers to teach communicatively in classrooms, and China had witnessed profound changes in teachers' attitudes towards CLT. Liao (2004) claimed that all the difficulties with adopting CLT can be overcome, and nothing should prohibit its

implementation in China for its enormous benefits of developing learners' confidence and fluency in oral interaction which is in dire shortage for the majority of Chinese learners. However, given the constraints on the adoption of CLT that can't be ignored, more proponents of CLT suggested an adaptation so as to benefit Chinese learners most, and contended that it is possible to achieve an appropriate blend of communicative competence and linguistic knowledge for Chinese EFL learners (Anderson, 1993; Li, 2004; Penner, 1995; Rao, 2002).

Along with the voices from the advocates, the well-documented resistance to CLT in Chinese EFL classrooms is also evidenced (Hu, 2005b). Some people deplored and opposed the pragmatic orientation of English language teaching and learning which aims to meet the societal demands, arguing for an increasing emphasis on the humanistic value of English language represented by English literature for the purpose of achieving a better understanding and appreciation of the cultures/civilization of English-speaking countries (Yin & Chen, 2002). Some people held a skeptical attitude towards introducing CLT into China, wary about the sufficiency of CLT in providing a well-organized foundation for foreign language learning, and the wide gap between theoreticians and practitioners (as cited in Wette & Barkhuizen, 2009).

Some people argued that there are no universally appropriate ways of teaching and learning; the approach that works well in one social and cultural context does not necessarily work well in a different one (Hu, 2005a). They criticized policy makers for downplaying the contextual divergences and forcing homogenization around the assumed universal principles of CLT, and compelled them to take into account the complexity of language education which is subject to the influences of a full range of macro and micro

factors. A more distinct and progressive voice emanated from a group of researchers who maintained an eclectic approach rather than CLT or any particular approach. They contended that CLT is not an appropriate pedagogical choice to make in China's EFL classrooms, and teachers should draw on various methodological options at their disposal to meet the demands of their specific teaching situations (Hu, 2005a).

In brief, two completely differing points of view characterize the ongoing debate as to the appropriateness of using CLT in China: One is opposition since "models of appropriacy vary from context to context" (Savignon, 2007, p. 45) while the other is endorsement yet with the necessity of exploring the ways of making CLT more applicable and beneficial in Chinese contexts. For the latter, many issues are vitally important, but are under-researched and insufficiently discussed in the literature. These issues include:

1. How can we make the native-speaker norms of communicative competence gear toward the EFL learners?
2. What proportion should the teaching of grammar take up and how can teachers combine the functional and structural aspects of the language effectively in using CLT?
3. How much mother tongue can be used in a CLT classroom that will not be considered excessive and inappropriate?
4. What level of inauthenticity can be allowed in teaching materials, if it is both inevitable and indispensable?
5. What errors can be seen as not warranted to correct?
6. How can communicative competence be assessed effectively?

Teacher as curriculum implementer vs. teacher as curriculum maker.

As differing views concerning the implementation of CLT come into being due to the discrepancy between policy initiatives and teaching realities, as delineated above, also pivotal to this issue is the two conflicting teacher images—teacher as curriculum implementer and teacher as curriculum maker. Both of them reflect a view of the teacher in relation to curriculum. Among the existing literature on the implementation and enactment of CLT in China, the two teacher images have long been overlooked.

What is commonly conceived in the educational milieu is the teacher as curriculum implementer image, which considers teachers as “mediators between curriculum and student outcomes” (Craig & Ross, 2008, p. 283). China’s educational enterprise has been traditionally dominated by this image, in which, teachers implement curricula, following as norms the teaching materials, objectives, and strategies, all pre-specified by their superiors, who are, “by virtue of their power, position, or formal knowledge base” (Craig, 2012, p. 91), supposedly more knowing of what should be taught and how it should be taught in the classroom. This teacher image is also widely known as “conduit” metaphor, which Craig (2005, 2012) framed as the “pinned butterfly” image, all depicting the teachers who are held responsible for performing the curriculum demands imposed on them. Clandinin and Connelly (1992) indicated that the teacher as curriculum implementer image reinforces “the assumption that knowledge is conveyed from outside classrooms to the teachers inside them” (p. 393).

Building on many researchers’ scholarship, primarily Dewey, Jackson, Tyler, Schwab, and Eisners, Clandinin and Connelly (1992) presented the teacher as curriculum maker image, which forms a sharp contrast to the pervasive teacher as curriculum

implementer image. As the name suggests, it means that teachers make curriculum alongside teachers, students, and other educational practitioners and researchers, instead of being prescribed how they should go about the curriculum. While the teacher as curriculum implementer image debases teacher agency, autonomy, and decision-making power, the teacher as curriculum maker image “strengthens the view of teachers as knowing and knowledgeable human beings” as Craig and Ross (2008, p. 283) stated.

At the core of the teacher as curriculum maker image resides two critical notions: One is “personal practical knowledge” introduced by Clandinin (1986) while the other is the method of narrative inquiry as the way to explore teachers’ experience (Conneely & Clandinin, 1990) (See Craig, 2012, p. 91). While the former acknowledges the knowledge of individual teachers in curriculum reform, the latter approaches the curriculum reform through exploring teachers’ stories and stories of teachers. The narrative inquiry is a collaborative inquiry of both educational researchers and teachers as curriculum makers. While listening to and describing teachers’ stories as they are told and lived out in classroom practice, researchers also have their voices surface as they work with teachers in their enacted curriculum. This is how the potential curriculum change and growth are attained, rather than simply having the curriculum mandated to teachers, in the vein of teacher as curriculum maker.

The two opposing teacher images underlie Craig’s question—“Why is dissemination so difficult?” (Craig, 2006), which is also the query that has naturally ensued so far in the review of the literature. As Craig examined a teacher’s struggle as a curriculum maker coming to terms with curriculum dissemination, she brought to light

how curriculum dissemination could be more invitingly and fruitfully understood from the curriculum-maker rather than curriculum-implementer perspective (Craig, 2006). All this provides an important implication to China's English language teaching that researchers on CLT have paid little attention to: Pedagogical change cannot be realized through curriculum implementation. Teachers are constructors rather than primarily receivers of the imposed pedagogical transition. The top-down educational enterprise of implementing CLT cannot succeed if it is not embraced in terms of the reconfiguration by teachers in light of their specific situations.

Summary.

Main points.

China's economic revitalization in the past few decades has brought about an unprecedented development of English language education and witnessed public interest in learning English. Paradoxically, it has not brought about a remarkable change in the approach to English language teaching, even though CLT has been mandated to implement as a policy decision by central education authorities. In a nutshell, this reform of instructional practices has not gained wide acceptance in real classrooms.

Moving forward.

The reasons for the unsuccessful implementation of CLT in China are sure to have a lot to do with a host of contextual factors — educational, cultural, economic, and social — arising in the transfer of CLT from ESL contexts to China's EFL contexts, in addition to the dominant teacher as curriculum implementer image. However, a more vital yet often overlooked issue that has impeded practitioners from making an endeavor to enact CLT is that its significance has not been fully acknowledged and espoused by

China's English language educators. Therefore, this research aims to bring to the forefront teachers' awareness of the criticalness of enacting CLT in China, as a corrective to the shortcomings of previous language teaching approaches as well as a solution to the long-felt ineffectiveness of China's English language education.

Different from the previous literature pertinent to the introduction and application of CLT in China, this research investigates this issue from the point of view of Chinese students' English proficiency and their English-using experience in the U.S.. Through finding out if communicative competence — the goal of CLT — is what Chinese students lack in English-speaking environment, it is hoped that this study can shed some light on whether China's English teachers should enact CLT or not, in spite of the difficulties in classroom practice.

Significance.

The number of Chinese students pursuing further education abroad has increased each year. Statistics released by China's Ministry of Education showed that the number of Chinese students overseas soared to 285,000 in 2010, a 24 percent increase from 2009 (He, 2011). A report released by the Council of Graduate Schools in the U.S. also in 2010 found that "China surpassed India as the top country sending students, with more than 127,600 Chinese enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States" (McMurtrie, 2011, para. 4).

As an increasingly significant number of Chinese students keep pouring into the English-speaking countries, lots of studies have arisen with the experiences of these Chinese students using English as the research topic. Among these works, some specifically looked to their listening and/or speaking skills which are/is considered to be

their biggest barrier to their academic success (Huang, 2005, 2006; Xia, 2000); some investigated their difficulties with communication from the socio-cultural perspectives (Holmes, 2005, 2006; Liu, 2001); some explored the multilayered factors influencing their silence/reticence in the academic settings (Jackson, 2002; Zhou, Knoke, & Sakamoto, 2005); and some focused on their experience of adjustment in both learning and living, and thus called for more support from the educational institution of the host country (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Wan, 1999). However, few works have tied the English proficiency of Chinese students in the U.S. to the English language instruction they previously received back in China, let alone the application of CLT in China.

As a considerable portion of these students are graduate students who have learned English for at least 10 years in China before attending American graduate schools, they well represent the “products” of China’s English language instruction. Their presence in the English-speaking environment not only offers them an opportunity to test their English proficiency, but also allows English language educators a unique perspective to understand China’s English language instruction. The predominant tool of evaluating students’ learning outcomes in China is traditionally examination-oriented which is reading-focused. However, as students come to an English-speaking environment, their previous testing results appear not a true indication of their English proficiency, nor are they a true reflection of the status quo of China’s EFL instruction (Liang, 2003). This point adds extra significance to discovering how sufficient Chinese students’ English proficiency is in allowing them to function in an English-speaking environment beyond how well they perform on tests in China.

Given all the significance, I plan on approaching the study through investigating the English-using experience of the Chinese students in the U.S.. An understanding of their use of English in the academic and social life in the English-speaking environment provides an important perspective to understand the efficiency of China's English language teaching, so as to shed light on the enactment of CLT in China's English language classrooms. Hopefully, it will also inform the English language education in other EFL countries confronted with the similar issue to China.

Chapter 3 Methodology

This research employs narrative inquiry as the methodology. To represent and understand Chinese students' experience of using English, narrative inquiry, giving prominence to human experience, seems the best match for the study. Featuring "open-ended, experiential and quest-like qualities" according to Conle (2000, p. 50), "the desired outcome is not a generalization but a narrative which renders clear the meaning inherent in or generated by a particular subject" (Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997, p. 76).

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry adopts a narrative way of thinking about experience. It is the methodology that uses stories as the portal through which human experience is interpreted and made meaningful both individually and socially. In a nutshell, it is "the study of experience as story" (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 22).

An overview.

Grounded in the philosophical tradition of Dewey who believed that education, experience, and life are inextricably intertwined (Dewey, 1938), Connelly and Clandinin used the term *narrative inquiry* first in the educational research field in 1990, and established the educational importance of narrative inquiry as a research methodology (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Prior to that, narrative inquiry "has a long intellectual history both in and out of education" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). It has been used in a wide variety of disciplines outside education, such as anthropology, linguistics, literary theory, philosophy, theology, women's studies, organizational theory, psychotherapy, geography, law, and medicine (see Craig, 2007). In short, narrative inquiry has gained a wide acknowledgment across disciplines for fostering multiple

interpretations of the phenomenon being studied, generating insights, and inviting attention to complexity. In the education field, narrative inquiry has “moved from being a research tool to becoming a vehicle for curriculum, first at the graduate and then at the pre-service level of teacher development” and professional development as pointed out by Conle (2000, p. 49).

According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), “(t)he study of narrative, . . . , is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2). Translated into the educational settings, the study of education is the study of experience, which is also the study of life. “One learns about education from thinking about life, and one learns about life from thinking about education,” as Clandinin and Connelly (1994, p. 415) explained.

Experience is the stories people live, and stories are the closest form that can research experience. People by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, and in the telling of them, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Therefore, education and educational research are the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories in education by educators alongside the researchers involved. The responsibility of narrative researchers of education is hence to describe such stories, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience, in order for stories, lived and told, relived and retold, to educate the self and others in the community in meaningful ways.

Conceptual framework.

There are “three commonplaces of narrative inquiry—temporality, sociality, and place—which specify dimensions of an inquiry space” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). Narrative inquirers are described as “being in the midst of a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, always located somewhere along the dimensions of time, place,

the personal, and the social” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 144). To understand a narrative inquiry, there needs to be a “simultaneous exploration of all three commonplaces” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). They are the “directions or avenues to be pursued in a narrative inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 54).

Temporality is based upon the conceptualization that life is ongoing while narrative inquiry is temporary. Whenever and wherever researchers embark on their narrative inquiry, they are in the midst of certain contexts of life. Life continues when inquiry is formally completed. Inquiries neither stop nor redirect the flow of life; rather, they take life as it comes to them. Therefore, “narrative inquiry is a process of temporarily joining the flow of life for the sake of inquiry—to understand, make meaning, and enhance the quality of life” (as cited in Connelly, Phillion, & He, 2005, p. 255). “In narrative inquiry, it is important to always try to understand people, places, and events as in process, as always in transition” (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 23). Conle indicated that “(i)f the temporal quality of narrative inquiry is heeded, the tentativeness of conclusions and the open-endedness of stories will prevail. These are much-needed qualities in pluralist societies” (2000, p. 56).

Sociality requires narrative inquirers to describe both the personal and social conditions of the people under study. Personal conditions mean “the feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480) of the inquirer and study participants. Social conditions mean “the existential conditions, the environment, surrounding factors and forces, people and otherwise, that form each individual’s context” (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 23). A narrative inquiry “is

always dated and placed and situated on a personal-social continuum” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 89).

Place requires narrative inquirers to attend to the specificity of location where events take place because in narrative inquiry, the specificity of location is crucial. “Place may change as the inquiry delves into temporality” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480). A narrative inquirer needs to think through the impact of each place on the experience.

In short, narrative inquirers need to be “aware of the details of place, of the nuanced warps in time, and of the complex shifts between personal and social observations and their relations” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 91). All the three strands come into play in making meaning of the experience. Collectively, they make narrative inquiry a multi-dimensional exploration of experience in “contextual and therefore contingent nature” (Conle, 2000, p. 56). Within the three-dimensional inquiry space, narrative inquirers make sense of the stories lived and told, relived and retold.

Why narrative inquiry.

I chose narrative inquiry as my way of understanding the English-using experience of Chinese students in English-speaking contexts, because it is the best method to make visible the complexities of human experience. Allowing me to think narratively about the participants’ experience, it provides the best tool of interpreting and reinterpreting the experience, so as to shed light on how China’s English language teaching has prepared students for their use of English in the U.S. and what implications in terms of EFL pedagogy can be taken from it. It may not promise immediate practical benefits, yet it values individuality, originality, and ownership by giving voice to participants.

Providing a sense of particularity that abstractions cannot render, this method enables researchers to obtain an in-depth look at particular individuals, or specific situations. When done well, the individuals and situations can take on their own distinctive qualities, and the researchers can come to know what goes on in a particular setting rather than how well or how accurately something is done. Connecting with fundamentally human qualities of experience, the storied format of personal experience research has the potential for transcending the specialties of research in particular subject field, and going beyond the immediate research field to influence the discourses or the practices of those in a larger research community. Arising from a Dewey notion that the principal interest in experience is the growth and transformation (1938), the greatest force driving narrative researchers is to “enter into and participate with the social world in ways that allow the possibility of transformations and growth” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 425).

Participants

Four participants — Bao, Xue, Hai, and Jin — were chosen to engage in this narrative inquiry, all expressing their willingness to participate, according to the approved Human Subjects Protocol by the University of Houston. They are three males and one female, whose ages range from early 20s to early 30s. Two of them are doctoral students, one is a postdoctoral fellow, and one is a master’s student. The length of time they had stayed in the U.S. varied, ranging from 0.5 year to 3 years at the time of the study.

Before coming to the U.S., all the participants received school instruction of English in China for no less than 10 years, and had no experience of living in English-

speaking countries, nor did they have substantial exposure to English outside school in China. These historical facts ensure that the participants' English proficiency in the U.S., especially in the initial days, is primarily the result of China's school English instruction, with no significant effect from other internal or external factors. The following section presents the profile of each participant.

Bao.

Bao, a male in his early 30s, is a postdoctoral fellow undertaking biomedical research in a world-renowned cancer center. He graduated with a Ph.D. in Science from the university where Xue had his Bachelor's and Master's degree in China. Bao never dropped out of the top two in GPA ranking before university. During college, he committed a lot of time and energy to the preparation of TOFEL and GRE for the sake of applying to American graduate schools. In the fourth year at university, he was accepted by a large state public university in the U.S. with a graduate fellowship. Unfortunately, somehow his visa application was turned down twice, and he had no choice but to give up his dream of pursuing a Ph.D. in the U.S. for which he had strived for long. A year later, he took China's Graduate Entrance Exam and was admitted by the university where he gained his Bachelor's degree. He got both Master's and Ph.D. degree from this university afterwards. Therefore, to Bao, his goal of coming to America was eventually achieved, though not as a Ph.D. student as he originally expected, but as a postdoctoral fellow.

Xue.

Xue, a male in his late 20s, is a third-year doctoral student. He studies Science and aspires to become faculty at a university or a scientist in a research institute after gaining his Ph.D. Academically, he undoubtedly falls into the cream of the crop of

Chinese students. From elementary school to high school, he was always one of the top two students in class. Gaining an exceptionally high score in College Entrance Exam, he was admitted into a very prestigious Chinese university and awarded freshman scholarship. During the four-year undergraduate period, he managed to obtain a high GPA and earn scholarship each year. Graduating as a top student in the program, he was offered by the university to continue graduate study without taking Graduate Entrance Exam. Upon completion of a Master's degree, he chose to pursue a Ph.D. from a U.S. university, and was successfully admitted to his dream school.

Hai.

Hai is a male in his mid 20s who is a second-year Ph.D. student in Engineering. He obtained his Bachelor's and Master's degree from a very prestigious university in China before coming to this doctoral program. He is very intelligent, and possesses an outstanding learning ability. His academic achievement was always among top of the top from elementary school all the way through graduate school in China. His achievement in research was notable, too. He was one of the most prolific young researchers when he was a master student in China. However, his English grade was always only slightly above the average. He would have been accepted by a more renowned American university if not for his TOEFL and GRE scores, according to him. Whenever he speaks of his English language skills, he says half seriously and half jokingly, "I, such a great guy, just can't excel in English!"

Jin.

Jin, a female in her early 20s, is a first-year master's student in Social Sciences. Before coming to America, she graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Teaching Chinese

to Speakers of Other Languages in China. This is the major that requires a relatively high proficiency of English. In her words, it is like “dual degrees” (in Chinese and English). The rigor of the courses aiming for improving English proficiency is not much different than that in English Department. According to Jin, this was an important reason why she chose this major. She has a very strong interest in English since childhood. Born to a very well-off family, she was one of the few students in China at her age who attended a privately-run English-Chinese bilingual elementary school. Devoting a large amount of time and energy to English learning when in China, she said that she was never doing as well in other subjects as in English. Of the four participants, she is the only one proclaiming that she has always excelled in English among her Chinese peers. The other three participants all self-perceive their English-proficiency as average when in China, though having passed all the required English tests even with high scores.

Prior to the study, each participant was assured that their personal information would be kept confidential and would be used only for the purpose of research. No generalizable conclusions will be drawn from the four participants; instead, what the salient issues in understanding Chinese students’ English-using experience in America will be highlighted. People lead multidimensional lives and tell multidimensional stories. Rather than anticipating a univocal mode of conceptualization and behavior from the participants, I will value the multiplicity of the experience to be seen and the stories to be told.

Establishment of Collaborative Research Relationship

For Xue and Bao, I have known and befriended them for many years, which can trace back to the time when all of us pursued graduate study in the same university in China. Coincidentally, Xue and I were admitted to two different universities both in Houston and came to this city almost at the same time. A year later, Bao received offers from several research institutes of the U.S. as a postdoctoral fellow, and finally accepted the one in Houston, which made our reunion happen. Therefore, the “contractual relationship” of research with Xue and Bao actually stems from our long-term friendship, which not only saves us the time of getting to know each other and building trust and rapport conducting a narrative research requires, but also allows me a unique advantage of critically describing and decoding their inner worlds.

For Hai, I got to know him when I recruited subjects for the survey designed to examine Chinese students’ self-perceived English proficiency for the course of “Survey Methods.” He walked towards me, listening very attentively while I was explaining the intention of the survey research to some Chinese students in an auditorium of their college building. Different than other Chinese students who agreed to help complete the survey, he genuinely talked to me how appealing and meaningful he thought this research was. I so introduced to him more about my research interest and the dissertation research I was about to undertake, wondering whether he was willing to be one of the participants. He immediately said “yes” and left his contact information.

I knew Jin during the university’s international students’ check-in section for which I served as a Peer Advisor. Her special interest in English and self-perceived high English proficiency among Chinese students both intrigued me into investigating what

kind of experience of using English she had gone through in the U.S. in both academic and non-academic life. However, it was not until I sought for and obtained her permission to be my research participant did I start getting acquainted with her.

Given the consideration that unlike Xue and Bao, Hai and Jin were not somebody I had known for long and very well, I paid special attention to building a close rapport with them. I managed to obtain a prolonged engagement with them over an extended span of time, knowing about their daily occurrences and idiosyncrasies in terms of their English-using experience in particular. The narrative inquiry did not begin until I was assured that the participants would speak of their perceptions and present their personal stories with a trust on me that their voices would be reflected truthfully and respectfully.

Ethical Considerations

While the establishment of a collaborative research relationship in a narrative inquiry serves as a “solution,” it may become “source of the problem” in terms of ethics in the meantime. As Connelly and Clandinin pointed out, “(e)thical considerations permeate narrative inquiries from start to finish: at the outset as end-in-view are imagined; as inquirer-participant relationships unfold, and as participants are represented in research texts” (2006, p. 483). Therefore, ethical considerations are embedded in the collaborative relationship throughout the undertaking of narrative inquiries.

From the outset, I illuminated to all the participants the philosophy of carrying out a narrative inquiry, letting them understand how crucial their self-disclosure and mutual sharing of stories are, not only to this inquiry, but also to China’s EFL educational enterprise as a whole. They expressed their willingness to take on this collaborative undertaking with me, by revealing and reflecting on their experience as truthfully as they

can and giving me full trust. They shared the hope that as they tell their lived stories, Chinese students' English-using experience in America can be better understood, as an important contribution to the improvement of China's EFL education. To safeguard their rights and welfare, I informed them that I would protect their privacy by using pseudonyms for themselves as well as for geographic locations while describing their stories, and they have the rights of refusing to participate and discontinuing at any point. Furthermore, I assured to them that all the resulting field texts and research texts would be given to them for review and would not be utilized until they agree upon the content and further research use.

Narrative Tools

Narrative inquirers contribute to the research by virtue of their "presence in the setting as observers, by virtue of questions asked, of active listening in interviews, and through participation in the mutual process of elaborating the stories of all the participants to the process" (Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997, p. 79). Though Clandinin and Connelly (2000) indicated that the kinds of field texts are virtually endless and they encouraged narrative inquirers to be open about the possibilities, the sources of the stories of a narrative inquiry primarily include field notes, journal records by either participants or the researchers, interview transcripts, documents, picturing, metaphors, personal philosophies, autobiography, biography, letter writing, and individual's lived stories (See Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The field texts of this research mainly derive from field notes, thick descriptions, and interview transcripts collected from observations and interviews.

Observations.

To gain an understanding of the English proficiency of Chinese students in academic settings, it is important that I document or portray the everyday experience of them using English in schools. The natural setting is the direct source of my field texts, which includes the classroom lectures, seminars, group discussions, and lab meetings. They are all academic discourse communities in which students are expected to share their points of view and communicate interactively with other colleagues using English. I went directly to these settings with the participants, equipped with a pad and a pencil to take field notes, observing how they interacted with others using English, how they initiated communication, how they made response to others, etc.

Fraenkel and Wallen (2008) indicated that the length of an observation is extremely important in qualitative research, because “(c)onsistency over time with regard to what researchers are seeing or hearing is a strong indication of reliability” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008, p. 453). Ideally, observations should be conducted as regular a basis as possible over a period of time and be describe in all of its richness. I conducted a total of four observations per participant. The duration of the observation varied among participants depending on the occasions on which participants were observed. Because making observations is a natural approach, one wherein the researcher is an unobtrusive observer of the involved people, practices, situations and settings, I attempted to be as unnoticeable as possible during the observations. Meanwhile, I tried my best not to ignore anything that might lend insights to the understanding of their English proficiency, such as gestures, conversational gambits, and facial expressions. Through observation, a

large amount of storied “data” were collected in the form of field notes, and then supplemented with more detailed descriptions, interpretations, and insights afterwards.

Interviews.

Each participant was interviewed in person three times, with each interview being approximately one hour. Before the interviews, I formulated a semi-structured interview protocol that not only targeted at the research questions but also allowed for maximum flexibility to maintain a natural conversation for the sake of generating more recollected personal stories regarding their studying and living experience using English. For the convenience of the participants, I let them determine the times and locations of the interview they preferred.

During the interviews, I tried to make the atmosphere relaxing, conversing with the participants as an old friend who was also a doctoral student situated in the environment similar to their own and cared about the sufficiency of their English proficiency. In this way, the participants could feel at ease talking with me with fidelity. Plus, I paid special attention to responding “skillfully to what the subject is saying in order to guide, without leading” by using different types of responses at different stages of interview (Carspecken, 1996, p.157). To allow them to better express themselves, all the interviews were conducted in Chinese, the participant’s native language, tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then translated into English in their entirety.

In addition to the major sources of field texts as described above, other sources include a range of personal communications with the participants, such as follow-up emails, on-line chatting, the participants’ on-line blogs, observation at social gatherings and chance encounters, and informal conversations conducted face-to-face or via

telephone. They all constitute a valuable body of field texts. Though they did not undergo systematic analysis, they were referenced in formulating an interview protocol, as well as providing narrative sources for storying and restorying.

Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis and interpretation process is twofold: inquiry of narrative as “both phenomenon and method” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 416) and Carspecken’s meaning reconstruction process (Carspecken, 1996). The interpretive tools drawing on the narrative inquiry include broadening, burrowing, storying and restorying (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), while the interpretive tools drawing on reconstructive analysis include the construction of meaning fields, horizon and validity analysis, power and role analysis, and coding schemes (Carspecken, 1996). It is hoped that narrative inquiry and Carspecken’s meaning reconstruction process serves as a complement to each other, with the former playing a guiding role throughout the whole analytic process while the latter responsible for more text interpretation at a micro level. Below is how the information underwent analytic procedures, which is open to scrutiny and critique.

Narrative inquiry.

Weaving lived stories into field texts.

Lived stories emerged from observations, interviews and conversations, and were represented in the narrative form of field texts. Composing field texts embodied an interpretive process, in the sense that all field texts were selective reconstructions of lived stories, shaped by the selective interest of both researchers and participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this narrative inquiry, the particularities of participants, personal and concrete, such as traits, values, ways of life, were embedded into something broad and

generic, shaping a major storyline of their English-using experience in America in meaningful ways.

While narrating the participants' experience of using English in the U.S., the "internal and existential conditions" simultaneously inherent in the experience were paid special attention, which was reflected in four directions according to Clandinin and Connelly (1994, p. 417). These directions include inward, which means the internal conditions of participants' feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, moral dispositions; outward, which means the existential conditions, the environment, or reality the participants are situated in; backward and forward, which mean seeing stories occurring in an ever changing life space in the past, present, and future (See Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 417). In general, the field texts featuring lived stories should "reflect the temporal unfolding of people, places and things within the inquiry, the personal and social aspects of inquirer's and participants' lives, and the places in the inquiry" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 485), which is the interplay of the three commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and place in the inquiry process as deciphered before.

Transforming field texts into research texts.

According to Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007), "narrative inquiry is much more than the telling of stories" (p. 21). Besides, "(w)e need to move to the retelling and reliving of stories, that is, to inquiry into stories" (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 33). This requires that researchers transition field texts into research texts, in other words, lived stories to research stories, or personal inquiry to research inquiry. Difficult as it may be to tell a story, the retelling of stories is more difficult yet important which allows for growth and change.

Having “a recording quality to them, whether auditory or visual,” as Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 132) indicated, field texts are richly detailed and descriptive, close to experience, and shaped around particular events. In contrast, “research texts are at a distance from field texts and grow out of the repeated asking of questions concerning meaning and significance” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 132). “It is responses to the questions of meaning and social significance that ultimately shape field texts into research texts” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131), as well as the analysis and interpretation of a narrative inquiry.

In “narratively cod(ing)” the field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131), I was mindful of the “names of the characters that appear in field texts, places where actions and events occur, story lines that interweave and interconnect, gaps or silences that become apparent, tensions that emerge, and continuities and discontinuities that appear” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131). However, “(f)ield texts have a vast and rich research potential” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 132), and “(t)here is no one bringing together of the field texts into research texts” as Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 132) pointed out. Thus, I returned to them over and over again, bringing personal perspectives as well as new research puzzles as inquirers, keeping re-searching the texts, and having my own restoried lives mingled with the participants’. As I engaged in this work, I began to see one field text in relation to others and link them as a meaningful whole, and gain a new dimension of interpretation and generate new shared stories. The sharing of the participants and the interpretation of the researcher interwove that collectively characterized the stories, lived, told, relived, and retold.

Establishing researcher “signature.”

In the process of transitioning from field texts to research texts will arise an issue of difficulty in narrative research which is also an issue of significance, that is, the establishment of researcher identity, or “signature” in the term of Clandinin and Connelly (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 424). In the negotiation between the representation of the participants’ voice and the researcher’s voice, it is the researcher’s narratives of experience—his or her own tellings, livings, retellings, and relivings—that take up the centrality, and determine the starting as well as the ending point of the inquiry. Narrative researchers need to manipulate well between capturing the participants’ voice, representing the researcher’s voice, and speaking to the audience’s voice. Once with inadequate wariness, the researcher will be easily stuck into a dilemma of putting too strong a stamp on the work running the risk of overshadowing the voice of participants or too thin a stamp on the work resulting in a research that appears to duplicate the voice of the participants. Clandinin and Connelly used “the analogy of living on an edge” to describe this dilemma (2000, p. 147). Therefore, to create an appropriate researcher “signature” in the collaborative process of storytelling, while being fully involved and “falling in love” with the participants, narrative inquirers should also “step back and see their own stories in the inquiry, the stories of the participants, as well as the larger landscape on which they all live” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 81).

Carspecken’s meaning reconstruction process.

Note taking of the observations built up a primary record which consisted of field notes and thick descriptions. This primary record served as the basis for making preliminary reconstructive analyses. The results of these analyses helped generate the

interview questions, and more importantly, were used to compare with the results of the interview data. The rationale is that the “monological data” from observations contain “an element of uncertainty, or indeterminacy” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 42), and therefore, the meanings constructed from these data might not be what the participants would infer themselves, either overtly or tacitly. It is essential that researchers cross check these data with the “dialogical data” generated through interviews. Because the data collection is recursive in the sense that it can occur at any phase of the course without a clear boundary between when is the beginning of writing and when is the completion of data collection, interpretations were made continuously throughout the entire course of the study. Finally, emerging themes were identified through coding, and the themes were then subsumed under categories and elaborated on.

Credibility

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) indicated, “As with all kinds of social science inquiry, narrative inquiry texts require evidence, interpretive plausibility, and disciplined thought” (p. 485). What is worth noting is that this “evidence” is not built on empirical proof, or universal truth. As Bruner pointed out, what a narrative inquirer seeks to establish is “not truth but truth-likeness or verisimilitude” (Bruner, 1985, p. 97), “a compound of coherence and pragmatic utility” (Bruner, 1996, p. 90). Its significance is rooted in their believability rather than the absolute consistency or authenticity of events. Lyons and LaBoskey (2002) also suggested that for narrative inquiry, “validity” rests on concrete examples of actual practices presented in enough detail so that the relevant community of practitioner researchers can judge the trustworthiness and usefulness of the observations and the analysis of an inquiry. Therefore, my central focus was placed on

“whether something is lifelike and has a real-life sense” (Bruner, 1986, p. 11), through creating believable stories, convincing drama, and credible historical accounts.

Conle (2000), in constructing “some criteria that would keep narrative inquiry within the bounds of rationality and not conflate it with fictional narrative,” provided concrete guidelines by drawing on Habermas’s four validity claims. He asserted that narrative inquirers should claim that

- they truthfully represent their feelings, intentions, etc;
- their stories are socially acceptable;
- the contents of the narratives are true with regard to what they describe;
- the language is comprehensible (Conle, 2000, p. 56).

All the four criteria served as guidance in enhancing the rigor of this narrative inquiry.

A difficulty in establishing the credibility of a narrative inquiry is the “open-endedness,” an intrinsic feature of narrative inquiry. A good inquiry should always be open to different interpretations, leaving readers to fill in the gaps with their own experiences and perspectives. As Conle pointed out, “There are no single causes, no predictable effects. Instead, open-endedness pervades all data” (Conle, 2000, p. 52).

Accordingly, for narrative inquirers, “ongoing reflection” is essential, which Clandinin and Connelly (2000) called “wakefulness” (p. 184). A narrative inquirer should always remain awake to the critiques, which, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), “allows us to proceed forward with a constant, alert awareness of risks, of narcissism, of solipsism, and of simplistic plots, scenarios, and unidimensional characters” (p. 182).

However, “this does not lead to arbitrariness of procedure. An inquirer/writer is driven by ‘a sense of the whole’ and is led by ‘tensions with a history’ and ‘subconscious

question marks” (Conle, 2000, p. 52). Moreover, every attempt should be made to ensure credibility of the study. Craig (2003) suggested that narrative inquiry “is a multi-faceted approach that takes into account multiple clusters of stories and many versions of stories narrated by a multitude of tellers” (p. 31). After the observations, the attendees/peers/professors/ were briefly interviewed immediately to verify certain understandings and assumptions regarding the participant’s English proficiency and communicative competence in particular. During the interview, I tried to let the interviewee take the lead while I sought for clarification and expansion of what the interviewee said. Immediately after each interview was transcribed and translated, I read through it over and over again to see whether there were any confusing points or eminent points needing further clarification through follow-up emails or additional face-to-face meetings.

In addition, to check for researcher bias and partiality, peer debriefing was employed, sending the thick descriptions, field notes, translated version of interview transcripts, as well as the subsequent research texts to the participants in order to confirm or disconfirm the authenticity of the content and render it as close as possible to the meanings indicated by the participants. Member checking was also used to verify the meanings drawn by myself against the comments from the participants’ fellow students, labmates, instructors, and supervisors. Both field texts and research texts underwent continuous revisions as peer briefing and member checking took place. To summarize, throughout the inquiry, I constantly shared my writing on a work-in-progress basis with the participants as well as “the response communities” by asking them to read my work and responding in ways that helped me see other meanings that might lead to further

retelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 60). All these efforts served to solidify the themes to be emerged through the telling and retelling of the participants' lived stories.

In addition, I am hopeful that the information collection and analytic process I have demonstrated above can contribute to the credibility of interpretations as well. Comparing what I observed from the settings with what the participants said in the interviews and conversations naturally constituted "triangulation," an important tool to establish the credibility of qualitative research. Moreover, my long-term friendship with the participants and my status as a Chinese student pursuing a doctoral degree in an American graduate school like the participants, both enabled me to share a great deal of common experiences and perspectives with the participants. As Carspecken indicated, the more familiarity a researcher has with his/her subjects and their culture, the closer his/her articulated meanings are likely to be what his/her subjects themselves acknowledge (Carspecken, 1996).

Chapter 4 Stories Lived and Told

Narrative is important as both process and product, and as method as well as the resulting narrative accounts. According to Craig (2007), stories, as the end product of a narrative way of knowing, can best understand experiential phenomena. This chapter, in the form of narrative, tells the personal stories of the four participants about their studying and living experience using English in the U.S., as their journey unfolds from the point they arrived in this land. My own lived and told stories, unnamed, even perhaps secret, also come to light as much as did those of the participants.

All the sources of field texts, including field notes, thick descriptions, interview transcripts, and personal communications, are associated with each other, and complement each other, in forming the field texts as an organic whole. The key elements that weave the stories together include character, place, scene, plot, tension, end point, narrator, context, and tone. All of them contribute to shaping the narrative inquiry plotlines in making sense of the stories.

Bao: What I need is not what I was taught

Being the only child of a working-class family in a small town in northern China, Bao was self-motivated, disciplined, and hard-working since he was very young. As strong a student as he was, he still found it very difficult to learn English, especially grammar. Though he began to learn English in the first year of middle school, it was not until in high school that he started having some sense of grammar, what sentence structure meant, and how grammar worked. He had no idea what he learnt English for either, except for the sake of tests. He hated tests, especially the section of Reading Comprehension on the tests, which, in his opinion, was not testing language ability, but

reasoning, to a great extent. The questions asked and the answer choices given were designed to be intricate and roundabout not in language but in reasoning. He always chose the wrong answer not because he couldn't understand the reading or his English ability failed to reach the difficulty level required by the test, but his path of reasoning was different than the one leading to the sole "correct" answer.

At the university, because of planning on applying to an American graduate school for a Ph.D., Bao set a higher expectation for his English proficiency than most of the other Chinese students. However, he felt that the English classes at the university were not as helpful as they might have been. Reading and grammar focused, the classes were "boring," "useless," "meaningless," and "couldn't motivate me at all," to put it in his words. In addition, the difficulty level of the English class was below that of TOFEL and GRE. Moreover, "the English proficiency of the teacher was not good. She even couldn't speak English well. Her speaking ability was also bad, in my opinion," Bao said, giggling. He continued:

We need teachers who not only know English, but also really communicate in English and teach us to communicate. However, this teacher did not. What she taught could be completely learned by myself, so what was the point of attending the class?

Therefore, he became reluctant to go to the English class, but tended to study English on his own, using purchased English magazines and newspaper as complementary study materials. In this way, his English grade still managed to remain at the top of the class.

Presently as a postdoc in the U.S., self-evaluating his English proficiency as "poor," Bao said that he was never actively engaged in lab meetings, department

seminars, or any academic activities. The main reason was the lack of communicative competence in English, which was his biggest problem. He had difficulty understanding what other people said, which, accordingly, made him unable to raise any question or make any comments. He could only understand the speech when it was not spoken fast. Actually, he could understand sounds when they were isolated, but when they were in words or groups of words, he had a very difficult time understanding them. If a speaker was from another non English-speaking country and spoke with an accent, it would be more difficult for him to understand. Even though he did understand and voice his opinions, others seemed to have trouble understanding him. Unable to speak English spontaneously, when it was his turn to make a presentation, he needed a long time to memorize every single word to be said.

With the above preliminary understanding of Bao's English ability, I went to seek for the approval from Dr. A, the PI (principal investigator) of Bao's lab, to observe Bao's performance using English in the lab. To my surprise, he gave me an unexpectedly big welcome and almost treated me as a savior! He started out complaining to me how poor Bao's oral English was, saying that he could not even open his mouth when he first came to the lab. From there, Dr. A expressed his strong wish for me to help Bao improve his English communicative competence so that his academic research and professional development will not be affected by it. He had me mark on my calendar all the times Bao was scheduled to give presentations in the next couple of months, which he said Bao may not tell me all, but he personally welcomed me to come and observe on any of the occasions.

Obviously, Bao's English communicative competence had been the headache of his PI for a long time, and my request for observing his performance of using English happened to give his PI a piece of hope for having his communicative competence improved. What I found interesting was that, the meeting with Bao's PI, which was originally meant to gain his approval to conduct observations in his lab, became an outlet for his worries about Bao's English communicative competence, and an urgent request from his side for me to come and observe as possible as I can. Unintentionally but importantly, it provided me with valuable implications for Bao's English communicative competence from the perspective of his PI.

At the same time, Bao was well aware of the discontent of his PI with his English communicative competence. What he presented on whatever occasions was all the work of the lab, which was mainly why his PI cared about his communicative competence so much, according to Bao. Not only his PI, the Vice Chair of the Department also admonished him of his poor communicative competence, not long after he came here. The Vice Chair is the PI of their collaborative lab which has lab meetings with them once a week. Probably for the consideration of saving Bao's face, he did not talk with Bao directly, but signified to Bao's PI that Bao needed to improve his speaking communicative competence.

Given all this, I was especially looking forward to observing his performance using English in academic settings. Below is an excerpt from the phone conversation we had in the evening before he made a presentation in a seminar. "I" refers to me, the author.

I: How's your preparation going?

Bao: I have prepared for two weeks, and have memorized all the words I will say, and rehearsed many times. However, I'm still very nervous.

I: Why?

Bao: My English is too poor, and I'm afraid they can't understand my spoken English.

I: Why do you have this concern?

Bao: They always can't understand me. I can't understand the questions they raised, either. I can only guess, and always have no idea whether I have answered their questions.

My thick description before his presentation recorded another revealing scene.

“At 3:45pm (15 minutes prior to the start of the seminar), Bao was standing beside his PI, Dr. A, looking at him helping communicate with a technology person, setting up the laptop and projector. Shortly, two other presenters walked over to Bao, asking whether he minds switching turns with them. Bao, scratched his head, appearing very puzzled. They therefore explained their meaning again in more detail. Bao appeared more puzzled, squeezed a smile embarrassedly, and looked to Dr. A. Seeing this, the two presenters had to say their request again to Dr. A who was in the midst of speaking with the technology person. Dr. A replied that he thought Bao may prefer to go with the original order because he probably had already planned an experiment after the presentation. Casting a glance at Bao who was still standing aside, expressionless, they had no choice but left. Bao remained silent all along. Then, he walked towards an empty corner of the lecture hall, sat there quietly, body straight, two hands holding what looked

like a note page, staring at the ground vacantly, and appearing quite nervous.”

While Bao presented, he was very fluent, even rarely stammering, which seemed to indicate that he knew the content very well. However, his voice sounded low, soft, and even unsteady sometimes, and hard to hear. His speech largely consisted of a series of short and discrete utterances. I also felt that his vocabulary was limited, use of structures was imprecise many times, and person, space, and time references were often used incorrectly.

If by committing every single word to memory beforehand, he could get by in the presentation, the Question and Answer section was really a big challenge to him. The people who asked questions used slowed speech, repetition, paraphrasing, or a combination of these to be understood by him. Bao’s face flushed red, appearing very embarrassed and nervous. He seemed to know the answer, but his mouth could only utter “um, um...” continuously. It looked as if he tried hard to speak something, but could not. When he was finally able to speak, his speech was limited to occasional isolated words, and was very stumbling, halting, and repetitive.

To understand Bao’s English proficiency especially communicative competence from the perspective of native speakers, I randomly interviewed three audience members after the seminar. Two of them were doctoral students and one was a professor. One student said bluntly that he had a hard time understanding Bao’s presentation and could only understand 50%. It was because he was not used to Bao’s accent, and his utterances were too low and indistinct like mumbling. The other student said that with the help of the PP slides he could follow along while Bao presented, despite mispronounced words

and grammatical errors. The professor used “limited” when asked to assess Bao’s English proficiency. She then added that she associated with Chinese students and scholars frequently and had been used to Chinese people’s English, but for the native speakers who did not deal with foreigners on a regular basis, Bao’s accent may be a major barrier preventing him from being understood. This remark made me wonder whether she implied that if not for her familiarity with Chinese people’s English, Bao’s English proficiency would have been rated lower than “limited” by other native speakers.

In academic contexts, Bao’s “limited” English proficiency especially communicative competence affected more than his performance in making presentations. Besides, he was very disappointed for not having developed more personal interactions and friendships with American colleagues because of the poor communicative competence, which he articulated well as shown in the following passage,

While attending this and that kind of academic events, in addition to talking about our own research, what is equally important is communicating with people, impressing people not only with your research, but also with your unique characteristics, your charisma as a person. I have seen some speakers aptly demonstrate their amiability, humor, and wit while presenting their research well. However, the limitation of my English communicative competence confined me within simply the talk of what I had done for my research, and made me unable to display other facets of my personality. I don't like me speaking dully with a poker face, but when you have a big difficulty expressing yourself and understanding others, what else can you expect? For example, when two presenters came to speak to me before the presentation, I even had no idea what they were talking

about. I could only smile to them. What else could I do?

Bao perceived his poor communicative competence in English as the biggest hurdle to the achievement of a greater professional development. However, when I asked him what constituted the greatest challenge for him in terms of the use of English in the U.S., surprisingly, he thought that the greatest challenge did not come from the pressure from professional development, but the demand for the language used in daily communication. For academic and research purposes, he could prepare and keep in mind the needed language usages in advance. Plus, he had possessed a certain level of the knowledge in the content area, the communication in academic settings became relatively easier. However, for the communication in real life, there was no way to predict and be prepared. Therefore, Bao felt that it was the everyday communication that was the most difficult for him and reflected a person's true English proficiency. He even said that "for us Chinese people in America, only when the everyday communication goes smoothly can we be more confident with our English proficiency in academic study."

Bao gave such an example when asked to recall his experience of using English in daily life,

When I go to restaurants, I don't know how to say the names of the food and how to order food. I feel so stupid. I don't know the difference between sandwich and hamburger. What looks like a sandwich to me may be actually a hamburger. What looks like a hamburger to me may be a sandwich. When I said "sandwich" while pointing to a "hamburger," or said "hamburger" while pointing to a "sandwich," I was very embarrassed. I still have no idea how they differ from

each other until today. That's the moment that makes me feel very bad. If I don't have a problem using English in daily life, I think my confidence in communicating with others will be greatly built up and I will become more active in academic settings.

If these difficulties with communication in daily life were mainly from face-to-face communication, telephone communication was a lot tougher for Bao. Without the aid of gestures and facial expression, its demand for verbal ability was relatively high, which caused him to try to avoid speaking English on the phone whenever possible. Even though there were many times a phone call would just work, he still preferred to spend time being physically on the site, because he knew communicating via phone would not work for him. In his own words, "My poor English communicative competence will either kill myself or drive the speaker on the other side crazy."

Bao attributed his difficulty with communication in English to China's English language education which in his words did not teach what he needed to function in the U.S.. After he came to the U.S., he found that a lot of what he was taught in China was not what was actually spoken by Americans in their everyday communication. For instance, he was taught that "how do you do" was the expression used for greeting someone when meeting for the first time, whereas in reality, no native speaker said "how do you do." Instead, "what's up" or "how's it going" was what he often heard in everyday life, yet he had no idea what they meant at first.

He wished that his former English teachers in China had taught him the language more practical and useful for communication, for example, how to have some small talks

in English in daily life, how to use language in a restaurant, in the airport, etc., so that he would not have to employ real-world knowledge to understand even some simple speech. He also wished he had been given more opportunities to practice communicating rather than simply reading and doing exercise, which, in his opinion, was the major reason for his very limited communicative competence in English.

Strongly feeling how important communicative competence in English was and how badly he was in need of it, he had been making great efforts to enhance it. However, Rome is not built in one day. When asked if there had been any change in the perception of his PI toward his English, he affirmatively said “no,” and then added that “he may think I have achieved some progress in research, but certainly not in English communicative competence.” For Bao, there was still a long way to go in his endeavor to improve his communicative competence in English.

Xue: Nodding does not mean understanding

Xue started recollecting his English-related experience from the first day of school in the U.S. when he participated in the Orientation. Since then, he has begun to intensely realize how poor his listening comprehension in English is. In his own words, “all I could do in the Orientation was guessing.” There were always a couple of words in a sentence he could understand. It was through these discrete words, together with the speaker’s gestures, handouts, and probably common sense at times that he was scarcely able to grasp the gist of the Orientation.

The difficulty with listening comprehension persisted in the classes he took. However, the degree of difficulty varied depending on the English spoken by different instructors. He had a bigger trouble understanding the instructors who were from a non

English-speaking country and spoke English with an accent than those who were native English speakers.

The instructors usually appeared not aware of the language barrier non native-English-speaking students like Xue were having, since most of the students were native English speakers. Luckily, there were PP slides and handouts available from the instructors, by means of which, Xue could teach himself after the class and make up for what he had missed in the class. He recalled that it was really a tough period of time when he had to study by himself all over again what was taught during the day after he was home from school each evening, while his native English-speaking peers could spend this time doing leisure and family activities.

Xue had a difficult time not only understanding oral English, but also expressing what he wanted to say. He was silent for most of the time in academic settings, such as small-sized classes, seminars, and lab meetings, and this was corroborated by my observations. He seldom spoke; instead, for most of the time, he either quietly watched other students talking and debating, or looked to somewhere else blankly appearing absent-minded.

When asked about his “silence” in the subsequent interviews, he made the following remark,

I don't have the response rate quick enough to catch up to others' speech, raising questions or responding to others' questions. Even though I get others' questions and know the answers, when I'm ready to speak after organizing my thoughts into grammatically correct sentences, it has already been answered by someone else or some other questions have been put forward and under discussion.

When he did speak, he spoke with a large difficulty, exhibiting great hesitancy, uncertainty, effort, and errors. He attributed the speaking difficulty to the way English was taught in China, as he said in the interview.

The former English learning has left me a shadow. It placed too much emphasis on grammar and tense. Now when it comes to speaking, I will be concerned about grammar and tense. The more I'm concerned about them, the more likely I am getting stuck.

As the length of observation time extended, I obtained a more complete understanding of his communicative competence in English. Generally speaking, I felt that he could only use simple language with a certain degree of accuracy, and his speech was restrained by limited vocabulary. On familiar topics he could ask and answer simple questions, respond to simple statements, and maintain simple face-to-face conversations. When prepared, he could ask questions and make statements with reasonable accuracy. However, when trying to express somewhat complex ideas, he may have to pause a lot. Time concepts seemed vague, vocabulary became inaccurate or inappropriate, and grammatical errors became fairly common though not quite preventing him from being understood. His pronunciation, stress, and intonation were generally poor and heavily influenced by Chinese. Misunderstandings occurred occasionally due to his weakness in pronunciation, but he could ask for clarification to verify comprehension.

One interesting phenomenon discovered was that he appeared more comfortable having one-on-one conversations than multi-party communications. He was very easily silenced when facing a group of people, whereas in two-party communications the

interlocutor may be more conscious of his second language speaker status, speak at a slower pace, in a clearer voice, and try not to use slang or complex sentences. Therefore, he always preferred to join one-on-one conversations rather than group conversations whenever he could choose.

When asked to self-evaluate his four language skills in English—reading, writing, speaking, and listening, he said:

My reading and writing are OK, especially reading. Attending lectures and seminars can't help me much with my study because of my poor listening ability. I mainly rely on reading to get necessary message and assimilate new knowledge. For me, it's particularly hard to communicate in English orally, and listening comprehension is the biggest problem. In terms of speaking, even though I can't express myself well, native speakers can understand what I say for most of the time. What always happens is that I can't understand what others say no matter how many times they repeat upon my request.

Xue attributed his difficulty with listening comprehension mainly to his bad pronunciation, as he said, "If a person pronounces words incorrectly or differently, or has no idea what the correct pronunciation should be, how likely is he able to understand the spoken language?"

In further explaining the reasons for his poor pronunciation, he recalled his earliest English language learning experience in China. As most of the kids in China in the 1990s, he began to learn English upon entering middle school at 13. It was a remote rural school, in which, students and teachers were all from the nearby villages. During the harvest season each year, the school would give several days off to students and teachers

for them to help families gather crops. Most of the teachers in this school graduated from secondary vocational school or junior college. The English teachers Xue had actually taught other subjects previously, and switched to English teaching due to school's lack of English teachers. Without formal school training of English, these teachers themselves may have a big problem with pronunciation and carry a strong indigenous accent when speaking English, let alone students. Moreover, for a student from a remote rural area who could not even speak standard Chinese but spoke a dialect with a strong accent, learning English and pronouncing English words became especially difficult for him. Therefore, the beginning stage of English language learning did not lay a desirable foundation for Xue, especially in terms of pronunciation. Once the way a person pronounces is established, it will be very hard to change in the future phases of language learning. Plus, pronunciation is not what the English language teaching in China is concerned about.

What teachers stress is scoring high on tests. Speaking is not part of the tests, let alone pronunciation. It does not quite matter whether a student's pronunciation is good or bad; instead, he or she only needs to remember words, sentences, and grammar. Xue said regretfully, "I wish I could realize the importance of pronunciation early on so that I would have listened to the English tapes and corrected my pronunciation on my own."

In the opinion of Xue, shortage of vocabulary was another important reason for his difficulty with listening comprehension. What was very ironic was that vocabulary study was always at the core of English teaching and learning in China, together with grammar. The English classes he took in China were all focused on the detailed study of new vocabulary and grammatical structures. A typical assignment, as he recalled, was

reading and writing the texts over and over again until he was able to recite and write them from the memory. Moreover, to pass all kinds of English tests in China, such as College Entrance Tests, College English Tests Band 4 and 6, the mastery of a corresponding number of words was indispensable. Because preparing students to score high in tests was the primary goal of all the schools Xue attended, it was natural that the majority of the time he spent in learning English was memorizing vocabulary. He was also frequently tested on the mastery of new vocabulary and grammar, in the form of dictation, grammar quiz, unit exam, etc. Urged by teachers, he even developed a habit of memorizing the whole textbook. Therefore, those words may look very familiar to him, and he may even tell where they appeared in the textbook. However, he still had difficulties remembering what these words meant exactly. Furthermore, because one English word may have several different meanings which are matched with corresponding Chinese translations, he always had a difficult time determining what specific meaning a word referred to in specific contexts.

English was never Xue's favorite subject, as opposed to math, physics and other subjects in the sciences, because reciting things was not his strong point according to him, though he worked hard, and performed fairly well on whatever tests given in China. In his own words, he "couldn't see much fun and sense of achievement in remembering English vocabulary, dialogues, and sentences. Because you could get a good score as long as you remember them, there was no experience of challenge or excitement in learning English which could be otherwise received in the process of solving mathematical problems." When the middle school he went to required each student to

select one subject for after-school interest development, he did not give any thought to English.

However, now in the educational institution of the U.S., Xue had to spend extra time and efforts improving his English, because his inadequate communicative competence was the salient factor that restrained him from fully displaying his academic knowledge and research capability, as he admitted. He recounted an experience that had struck him deeply. He once worked on a research project collaboratively with a labmate. It was he who had played a leading role in this project, from developing research ideas to designing and conducting experiments, and collecting and analyzing the results. However, while they actually reported the progress of the project to their supervisor, he seemed reduced to a subordinate position while his American colleague who spoke English fluently rose to a dominant position, explaining the methods they had used, defending their points of view, presenting their conclusions, and directing the shifts of the themes under discussion. Xue attempted to partake, but a few words into a sentence, he would pause when searching for the correct manner of expression. At this time, the native-speaking colleague would pick up what he tried to say but with a great difficulty and articulate it eloquently. Xue, therefore, spoke very little all through the talk. For a long time after that, he was overwhelmed by the frustration of having failed to display his understanding and knowledge of the research project he had worked on industriously and that his colleague could so easily outshine him not because of the science but due to language competence.

His supervisor had been very displeased with his English ability. He once said that when Xue first came to the lab and met him, Xue kept nodding for whatever he said

which misled him into believing that Xue had no problem with English. However, he later found that this was not true at all. On the contrary, Xue may not have understood anything he said. Xue did not know if his supervisor regretted having him in the lab, but he did know that his supervisor had pointed out his deficiency in English on many different occasions. When I asked him whether he remembered what his supervisor said about his English, he nodded very affirmatively, “Of course. He explicitly told me that if my English ability didn’t get improved, I would have trouble passing the Qualifying Exam which is in oral form.” He added that his supervisor even offered to pay for ESL classes for him to attend somewhere, but somehow this proposition did not work out. Instead, his supervisor used lab funding, buying him a “Rosetta Stone,” a language learning software at the price of \$159.

Moreover, “nominated” by both his supervisor and Department Chair, he was participating in an English Conversation Group launched by the Graduate School of the university at the time of the study. This conversation group was led by the graduate student leaders who were English native speakers, and aimed to enhance the conversational communication skills of students who were in need of it. It basically involved a one-hour meeting once a week, and lasted for five weeks, with each meeting discussing a specific topic such as food, sports, music, etc.

Because this conversation group was still in a pilot stage, rather than promoting it among campus-wide students, the organizers only distributed the advertising message to the faculty, letting them “nominate” the students they thought need to participate. Fortunately as well as unfortunately, Xue received emails from his supervisor and Department Chair in the same day, both “suggesting” that he participate. He thus became

one of the 20 students at the whole university who had the “honor” to be “nominated” to be part of this pilot English Conversation Group. I used “fortunately” and “unfortunately” simultaneously to describe this experience of Xue. It was “fortunate” because thanks to it he gained an opportunity to practice his communicative competence in English; it was “unfortunate” because his communicative skills were obviously considered “needing to be improved” by both his supervisor and Department Chair. Another note worth mentioning is that according to Xue, over one half of the 20 students in this conversation group were Chinese. This fact may imply that among all the non native-English-speaking students in the graduate school at Xue’s university, Chinese students’ communicative skills in general are considered “needing to be improved” by the faculty.

Xue placed a great hope on this English Conversation Group, expecting a great improvement of his English communicative competence from it. In addition to this English Conversation Group, he was trying to spare two to three hours a week from his tight experimental schedule to take the free English classes offered by a church. The deficiency in communicative competence has put him under too much pressure from many things all key to his academic development in the U.S., passing the Qualifying Exam, changing his supervisor and Department leader’s views about his English proficiency, fully developing his potential in academic study and career, and making his communication with other people easier.

Hai: Somebody gets to fix it

I was very fortunate that at the time my narrative inquiry began, there happened to be a “Student Research Day” held by Hai’s Department as a great opportunity to showcase student's research work by presenting a talk or a poster. On this event, Hai

would make a presentation on his research project, answered questions from the faculty and students, and talked about the issues of interest. As planned, I went to his lab at the time we agreed upon before this event, and from there, we were about to go to it together.

Unexpectedly, once I met him in his lab, he started talking about his problem with English writing, which, I could tell, must have plagued him for a while. He said that he had been working on a research paper aimed for publication. He believed it was a solid research, and to be able to get it published was very important for him. However, the writing of it caused him a great headache. Grammatical mistakes were all over the place in his writing. The language he used and the way he structured ideas were not how native speakers would do either. It was not even readable to his advisor, whom, he said, literally used the word “horrible” to describe his writing.

For the sake of publishing this paper, Hai was in urgent need of improving his English writing, and therefore wondered if I knew a writing class he could attend in the College of Education since I was from College of Education. I suggested he check the Writing Center of the university which can provide students with free one-on-one counseling on academic writing. He was very surprised that there was such a student service offered on campus which he had not known at all; otherwise, he would have sought it long time ago. Being thankful for my advice, he apologized for having wasted my time. I told him how much I appreciated his candidness which, to me, felt like a valuable plus rather than a waste of time, though not happening within the time of observation or “formal” interview.

The most conspicuous finding from the observation of Hai’s use of English on the “Student Research Day” was the striking contrast in his performance during the

presentation and post-presentation. During the presentation, he spoke very fluently, even quite fast. Though there was some evident misuse of grammatical structure, tense, person, time reference, and mispronounced words, generally speaking, these errors did not hinder comprehension. The vocabulary he used was primarily high-frequency words. In the aspect of syntax, his sentences were all short and simple, with many repetitions and restatements. I also noticed that he seldom looked to the audience while he presented but kept his head low for most of the time, either looking at the computer or the projector screen.

If his English proficiency especially communicative competence enabled him to survive the presentation, it seemed to fall far short for the Question and Answer section after the presentation. Hai could barely follow and understand the essential points of what others said even when spoken slowly and clearly. Moreover, each time he spoke, he had to think a long time beforehand, and even so, he spoke in isolated words and short sentences. Hai's rate of speech was slow, with long pauses. Plus, his stress, intonation, and tone sounded somewhat odd even faulty, and seemed to create a major obstacle for his speech to be understood. He had to frequently repeat his utterances to get them across to the audience.

In the interview with Hai at the end of the day, when talking about my observation finding that he seldom had eye contact with the audience while he presented, he made the following response, which, was also a summary of his performance of using English on the "Student Research Day" from his perspective.

I'm not used to speaking in front of people. In American graduate schools, students have to make a lot of presentations. However, in China, we were not

encouraged to speak. I didn't quite open my mouth before coming to America. This is a cultural difference. However, the biggest reason is my poor communicative competence. I'm very unsatisfied with my performance today. If I were to give it a score on a scale of 1 to 10, I would say it must be below 5, and my poor communicative competence accounts for 90% of it.

After conducting a few interviews with Hai, I found that to him, telling of his experience, to a large extent, was like an outlet for his prolonged frustration, stress, and helplessness with regard to his English as a second language practices in the U.S., and finally having someone, me, the researcher and a co-national, who really cared about and spent time listening to his experience. When I first asked him to recall any experience he went through that had struck him a lot or tell any stories related to the use of English he would like to share, he appeared very hesitant. After I made every attempt to prompt him, he finally said the following words, "Actually, I keep avoiding the chance of speaking whenever I can. I just don't want to speak. I just don't want to speak. If I don't have to really talk, I just don't talk." I have to admit that for his initial hesitance, I foresaw many causes possible, such as feeling uncomfortable disclosing his stories to others, trying hard to recall the past experience in his mind, not knowing where to start because too many memories emerged simultaneously, etc. However, this response was really out of my expectation. I was speechless for a few seconds after hearing it, and then unthinkingly squeezed a word, "Why?" He answered right away, "Why do I have to?" I was rendered more shocked. He continued,

My English is bad. I can't speak out what I wan to say. They can't understand

what I say, either. I'm afraid of making mistakes. So I just keep avoiding speaking English. I just say 'hi' or 'how are you doing' to people, and no more... (giggling), no deeper conversations...

As we engaged more deeply in the telling and living as the narrative inquiry proceeded, I managed to obtain a more clear and wide-ranging picture of Hai's English-related experience in the US.. When Hai first came to the U.S., he could not speak, nor could he understand what others said. While looking for an apartment, he had a big trouble communicating with the staff in the leasing office. They had difficulty understanding him, and he had difficulty understanding them too. It took both of them a lot of time and energy to understand each other until the lease could be finally signed. On his first day in the lab, his supervisor asked a lab member who was from India to introduce his project to Hai. The Indian student talked for approximately five minutes. Not having understood a single word, he could only say "good" embarrassingly as a response. Until today, he still has a difficulty understanding the English of the people from other non English-speaking countries.

For some of what the instructors said in the class, he could not understand either. However, fortunately, according to Hai, it does not quite matter to the students of Engineering. For formulas and equations, once they are understood, the language used to describe them becomes unimportant. Only when they can not get across by themselves do the instructors' explanations count. Even in this case, he was hesitant to ask the instructors for repetition. He knew that one more explanation would not suffice and it may not be good to keep asking, as he said, "Asking questions is not hard. You can use

simple language. What is difficult is understanding the answers to your questions.” Therefore, he would rather take all his questions home and spend extra hours figuring them out by himself. Sometimes, he simply had everything learned by himself before going to the class though this meant more efforts to be put forth. In preparation for the final exams, he found that the information he obtained from the classes was very limited because of his bad English listening ability; instead, he primarily relied on teaching himself. While taking the oral form qualifying exam, he recalled that for almost every question from the committee members, he had to request for repetition because of the inability to understand it the first time it was asked. At the conclusion of the exam, the chair of the committee said that he needed to improve his listening ability.

Hai was not only deficient in listening ability, but also in speaking ability. He lacked confidence and was uncomfortable with speaking English. He said “my grammar was bad, pronunciation was poor, and accent was very Chinglish.” He kept refraining himself from speaking until the time he had to pass an English speaking test.

As an international graduate student assistant, to be eligible for assuming a teaching assignment, he had to demonstrate proficiency in the English language, that is, to provide evidence of spoken English language proficiency. The evidence was completing and achieving a satisfactory score on a speaking test of English (SPEAK, short for Spoken Proficiency English Assessment Kit Test) administered by the University Testing Center. The passing score was 50 out of 60. Passing this test turned out a nightmare for him.

I took [it] um..., um..., a couple of times. It would be embarrassing to tell people how many times I took it (laughing). It was so difficult to me. It was really painful.

I was so stressed out. You know, if I didn't pass it, I would not be able to assist in the classroom, which meant I would lose the graduate student assistantship! I had no choice but to pass it!

After failing it several times, he talked with the test administrator who was also the grader.

I had prepared for it so hard, how could I fail it every time? Every time, I got 45, and only need five more to pass it! I was so close to passing it! Every time, I got 45! I don't understand! The grader explained to me that it was because my accent was difficult for him to understand. I really don't feel it. I just don't understand! Accent is the biggest reason! The questions on the test should be very easy, and I have no problem giving answers. He just couldn't understand what I was trying to say. I just don't understand! Many international students have accents, such as Indians, but people have no trouble understanding them. I just don't understand! I just don't understand! I don't know why! They can understand them well! I just don't know why!

Having finally passed the test did not make Hai's speaking ability any more competent for performing the teaching duties in the classroom. He was assigned to assist a professor in teaching one chapter of a book for an undergraduate course. He taught for a total of three hours, which was "very frustrating and embarrassing" in his words. He had a hard time speaking out what he wanted to say, and students had a hard time understanding him. An often occurring scene was: He stood there uneasily and helplessly, thinking hard what on earth the correct way of expression should be, after making several

futile attempts to get something through to the students, while the students stared at him blankly, perplexed about what he was trying to say. Sometimes when he was lucky, there may be a very smart student who managed to figure out what he meant, come up with the exact word(s) or even volunteer to explain it to the rest of the students, so all of them could finally understand what he had been trying to say and save him out of the predicament. This was not the most embarrassing moment for him. The time he found the most embarrassing was when one student said anything funny using idioms or colloquial language and everybody else burst into laughter while he was totally at a loss, having no idea what they were laughing about.

When I asked Hai to share any of his English-using experience in non-academic aspects of his life, he appeared very hesitant again. Thinking for a while, he went,

In non-academic aspects of my life? I don't really interact with American people often. My private life is actually not much different than that when I was in China. The people I hang out with are all Chinese. My roommate is Chinese. My friends are all Chinese. I go to Chinatown often. I read news from Chinese website. I use Chinese mostly. Actually, I don't have any real American friend. I feel that I have never been engaged in American life outside school. I don't know what I can share with you in this regard.

This was really a sharp contrast to Hai's personality. Hai was actually a very easy-going and sociable person. To get more close to American people's life and make friends with them, he registered into the Friendship program offered by the International Student and Scholar Services Office of the university when he first came to the university.

However, it was not long before he felt disheartened and dropped out. Restricted by his poor English communicative competence, he couldn't engage in any deep conversations with American people, but simply exchange of greetings and small talks. Coming from a different social and cultural background was also an important factor, which caused him to lack common interests with Americans. Therefore, however desirous he was of integrating into the American life, he found it difficult to achieve it.

Hai thought that no matter in academic study or in non-academic aspects of life, communicative competence in English was the most crucial yet inadequate skill for him. He learned English in China for more than 10 years which was typical for Chinese students, but the efforts were far from equal to his English proficiency, especially communicative competence, because China's English language teaching was "very problematic" in his words. While expounding how "problematic" it was, he made the following comments,

Under the pressure of the tests, everything it did was preparing students for scoring high on the tests. Communicative competence had been long overlooked. What a typical English class in China taught was all vocabulary and grammar, leading students through the texts one sentence by one sentence, and then doing exercise. That's it! They would not ask you to communicate in English. However, learning and accumulating such a large body of linguistic knowledge didn't get me any better [in communicative competence]. Remembering vocabulary and grammar is fundamental. You have to know it, but that's not enough for obtaining communicative competence. If we can't communicate using the language, what is the point of learning the language?

Indeed, what is the point of spending more than 10 years learning all the vocabulary and grammar so hard? After Hai came to the U.S., he found that the vocabulary he was able to make use of in written or oral communication was always a few very simple ones. A large proportion of the vocabulary he had learned in China was rarely used in real life in the U.S.. In contrast, the most essential vocabulary which was most commonly used in daily life in the U.S. was never taught in China and was unknown to him! Moreover, the emphasis on grammar, rather than facilitating communication, in reality, restrained Hai from communicating freely. To ensure the flawless grammar and zero language mistake, Hai found himself always trying to look for the correct form of expression before he was able to say anything. He deeply felt that it does not really matter whether the use of grammar is accurate or not. Instead, what is the most important for a language learner is the ability to communicate using the language, because the main purpose of learning a language is for communication. However, China's English language education, which, in his words, "helped anything but communication." Hai continued:

We were taught to memorize so many words, but the vocabulary most commonly used by Americans was left untaught. I constantly get stuck by the lack of vocabulary when I speak. I also spent so great energy learning grammar, but both my writing and speaking are full of grammatical mistakes. I have accent while speaking English, as Indians do. Why is my accent incomprehensible while Indians have no trouble?

Hai seemed to have so much confusion and frustration, as he said repetitively, "Somebody gets to fix it. Somebody gets to fix it."

Jin: I was not unprepared

Pursuing advanced education in the U.S. had been Jin's long-time dream since childhood. Compared to all the other three participants, Jin had a special interest in English, and had committed more energy to learning English in China. Coming from a wealthy family also allowed her to gain an access to more learning resources than the majority of her Chinese peers. All this can explain why Jin perceived her English proficiency as higher than the average Chinese student.

However, her communicative competence in her earliest days in the U.S. was still insufficient as I perceived. When she first came into the Master's program from China half a year ago, I once accompanied her to consult International Student and Scholar Services Office of the university regarding Curricular Practical Training (CPT) application which gives international students legal permission to work outside school. Jin needed such a working permit, because she wanted to accumulate some internship experience outside school early on in her student period to be more competitive in the future job market. At that time, I found she spoke very little. It was primarily I who helped her ask questions, figure out the process, and take down notes. When she spoke, she used a low and soft voice, and appeared very unsure and hesitant.

Now at the time her first school year was coming to an end, I was so eager to talk with her and discover: With a perceived relatively high English proficiency among the Chinese, what kind of English-as-a-second-language experience had she gone through in her academic study and non-academic aspects of life? Before making an inquiry into her experience, I had foreseen that she may have done pretty well with all the academic work using English or may have encountered some difficulties with English but still managed

to overcome. However, to my great surprise, she was facing the risk of having one class failed!

It was an elective course in Reading and Language Arts which was very rigorous. By the time the narrative inquiry was conducted, the points that had already been taken off from the full score of the course only allowed her to get a C, and there were still a final test to be taken and a paper yet to be assigned! She said that the best result she could expect of the course as of the moment was C-, which she would be happy with. She was just so anxious about getting a D!

I have to admit that I was so astonished and couldn't even speak a word upon hearing it. The girl saying C- was acceptable for her really gave me a hard time associating with the girl who was so motivated and ambitious to find out the information regarding the application of the coursework related internship when she first came to the program!

I asked Jin whether she had talked with the class instructor about the possible failure. She said she did, and did it many times throughout the semester. Actually, halfway through the semester, her grade was dropped to B already. For a 7-point paper, she only scored 2.5 points. The instructor circled all her grammatical errors and misused words. In a closed book test, her score ranked second to the last in the class.

Jin said that she had great difficulty catching the names of the authors and the literary works covered in the class. For those native English-speaking students, they may get them the first time the instructor referenced them. Even though they may not know them or may not have read them before, they could instantly note them down for later study. However, for Jin, if it was not something she knew already, no matter how many

times the instructor repeated it, she still couldn't get or spell it out correctly. She wanted to ask American classmates for help. However, all the students were designated the seating by the instructor according to the alphabetical order of their last names in the first class, so she ended up sitting in the last row on her own all through the semester. When she waited until the class was over, the questions had escaped her memory already. Barely talking with anybody in the class, she did not know whom to borrow notes from either. Another difficulty for Jin was remembering the very specific plots in the literature which was often tested by the instructor. Thinking of finishing a substantial amount of reading in a short time was daunting enough for her; to be able to remember exactly in which literary work which character says what at when is especially tough for her!

Though she had talked with the instructor how difficult the course was for a non native-English-speaking student, the instructor seemed to be unaware or chose to disregard all her challenges. Basically, he implied that this is what it is and the course rigor should be applicable to all the students in the class. How much Jin wished she were a native speaker so that she would have been doing much better in this course!

Given Jin's self-perceived high English proficiency, I was especially longing for observing her performance of using English in academic settings, and the findings confirmed her self-perception as true in my opinion. When she made a presentation on a given topic, she demonstrated competency in expression and comprehension much stronger than Xue, Bao, and Hai. She could speak almost fluently, with relative ease. She had a wider vocabulary, and a better control of linguistic knowledge in stringing sentences together in speech. Her ability to describe and give precise and enriched information was obviously better than all the other participants. Though there were

occasional errors in expression and structure, coherent articulation of idea was not detracted. What is more, compared with the other three participants, her pronunciation and intonation sounded a lot more like a native speaker, and more easily understood. Overall, her English proficiency and communicative competence in particular was not only much stronger than the other three participants, but also can be ranked as “top” among all the Chinese students, according to my English teaching and learning experience in China.

However, in class discussions, she did not seem to be able to participate effectively, and was quiet for most of the time, which formed a striking contrast with her personality. She was quite a vivacious and talkative person in life. The following is an excerpt from the thick description of what happened prior to a class. “I” indicates me, the author. “A” indicates a student from Taiwan. OC refers to “observation comments.” The italicized part are the conversations.

Arrived at 9:45, nobody was there.

At 9:50, Jin entered with a big backpack on her shoulders which looked very heavily loaded. Books could be seen stuffed tightly in it. She walked directly toward a seat without looking at anywhere, lip tight, totally expressionless on her face.

[OC: It seemed she was fully immersed in her own world, and did not notice my existence at all.]

I: *How are you doing?*

Jin: *I'm nervous! I'm threatened by the professor! He sent me an email, saying that I had been unprepared in the past two discussions, and this was not*

allowed. If I continue not to participate in the discussion, I'll risk failing the class. Tone is almost like screaming, voice sharp. “Threatened” is extremely emphasized. Looks panicked.

I: *How did the professor know that? He didn't attend the discussion, did he?*

Jin: *No, he didn't.* Shrugs her shoulders. *But there's a spy, spy among us!* “Spy” is intentionally repeated and emphasized. Her eyes open wide, tone as if announcing a very big event.

At this time, A entered.

A: *I guess I know the “spy” you are talking about.* Voice low, as if whispering.

Jin: *It's B. It must be B. I have suspected him for a long time. Kinds of hints indicate it must be him!* Sounds angry, voice loud, and hands striking the table. “Must” is strengthened in tone.

A: Nods and smiles naughtily.

Jin: *How could he report to the professor I was unprepared!* Body slightly shocks, as if with anger. Looks very agitated.

A: *You didn't speak much in the discussion, so he just thought you came to the discussion, unprepared.*

Jin: *I was not unprepared! I was... My English...* Voice loud, tone sounds indignant as well as helpless.

A: *I know.*

(The above dialogue is the translated version. It is in Chinese originally.)

This episode that happened before the class fully reveals that Jin's English communicative competence falls far short of the academic demands of the course, which is also why she was misunderstood as "unprepared" and was even "threatened" by the instructor to face the risk of failing the course if she continued to be "unprepared." In the interview after the observation, Jin kept saying "I was not unprepared! I was not unprepared!" Her eyes were full of the helplessness, grievance, and frustration of not being able to be understood. Tears could even be seen while she uttered the following words nearly sobbingly,

Every time before the discussion, I did the preparatory work very carefully. I tried to be active in the discussion, but I couldn't. Language is the biggest reason for me not to be active. If I want to say something, I have to prepare it for at least half a minute. I have to translate it in my mind. People may think why you are so slow in making response. It's because I'm translating and processing the language in my mind. OK, this is how I say it in Chinese. Then I translate it into English. When I'm ready to say it, the opportunity has already passed. Therefore, I'm never active in discussions, even though I want to. If you don't speak out, or don't give your opinions, people may think you don't know it or you haven't made any preparation.

I truly empathized with her. However, the difficulty speaking spontaneously in the discussion in academic study was not Jin's biggest challenge. As far as she felt, the use of English beyond academic study was where her greatest challenge was coming from. For most of the time in the class, she could understand what the instructors said if

academically related. Nevertheless, if they talk something not specifically relevant to the course content during the break time, she would not get it. Language was part of the reason, and the lack of American social and cultural knowledge was another important reason, as she pointed out. One of the consequences for her was having “very very few American friends,” upon which, she expanded as follows,

I try to avoid talking with American people. I still feel not comfortable speaking English. Some Americans are very friendly and try to talk with me. Even though I can understand them, I don't know how to express myself, so I just avoid talking to them. Even when I'm able to communicate with them, our conversations are only restricted within the exchange of greetings or some superficial topics. What interests us doesn't interest them. We don't have common interests or topics.

What seemed like a paradox was that despite all the difficulties and frustration Jin experienced in both academic study and non-academic aspects of life in the U.S., she still self-perceived her English proficiency and communicative competence in particular above the majority of the Chinese students. My observation also supported this point. Interestingly, she obviously did not attribute her relatively high English proficiency to the over 10 year study through the formal school instruction in China, but more to her personal motivation and efforts.

I have been interested in the English language since I was young, but I was never interested in the English class in China. Teachers simply taught to the test. This was the only thing they do. If you could do reading, and multiple choice, singling out the correct grammar, that's fine..., yeah, ..., that's what they did. The English class was so boring! They contributed nothing to the communicative needs! I

don't blame them for the setbacks I have gone through in America. However, if they taught differently, I probably would not have suffered so much!

The author: never fit in

As I listen to and tell of Xue, Bao, Hai and Jin's experience of using English in the U.S., I, as the researcher, as well as a graduate student in an American university who is also from China, resonate profoundly and empathetically with what they have undergone due to the lack of English proficiency especially communicative competence. Actually, the driving force behind this narrative inquiry derives from my own narratives of experience, which can be traced back to the experience when I served as the Peer Advisor for the International Student and Scholar Services Office of the university. The duty of Peer Advisor was assigned on a voluntary basis. The disproportionate ratio between the number of Peer Advisors from China and the number of Chinese students at the whole university really amazed me. The students from China constituted the second largest international student population at the university at the time of the study. However, the Chinese students who volunteered to serve as the Peer Advisor for the International Student and Scholar Services Office were very few. As I had more opportunities to get into contact with Chinese students and the students from other countries of the world on this volunteer job, I gained a deeper understanding of the insufficient communicative competence of Chinese students. The following are two journal entries from my journal records when I served as the Peer Advisor.

July 24, 2010

I have been working as a Peer Advisor of international students for International Student and Scholar Services Office since May. My major job is helping new

international students through the check-in procedures, answering their questions, and facilitating Orientations and a variety of international students' workshops. We have almost 20 peer advisors working together who are from Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan, and Mainland China (me). Indians make up the largest population of international students at the university. Among all the peer advisors, almost half of them are Indians; all are very fluent in English, communicative, quick to respond, and self-assured.

As one of the only two Chinese-speaking Peer Advisors, I'm wondering why Chinese students, the second largest international student population at the university, don't have the corresponding representation in Peer Advisors, the first student group representing the university to meet with new international students from all over the world. Why don't Chinese students take this voluntary job? Is it because they are not confident enough in their English proficiency? Or are they too occupied with their study or research and unable to spare a little bit extra time for other activities? Or could it be that they are not used to communicating with people from diverse backgrounds? Or could it be they are not comfortable communicating in English?

Anyway, I feel sorry that there's only one Peer Advisor from Mainland China (the other is from Taiwan), which has one of the biggest international student body at the university. It means something, and tells something about Chinese students' state of mind, or other aspects in their academic study and social life, all of which may deserve to be explored.

Jul 26, 2010

Having served the international students check-in one more day, I get a little bit tired but filled with thoughts.

First of all, I think I need to be engaged in self-criticism. Compared with other Peer Advisors, I, and a master's student from Taiwan, appeared quite reserved. Besides the factor of personality, I think the biggest reason is our insufficient communicative competence. The Peer Advisors from the Middle East speak English very freely, though with accent which creates a big headache to me, because it makes my communication with them very hard. Their English communicative competence really gives them a great edge over other international students, especially students from, say China, Korea, and Japan. They understand quickly, and make responses quickly, which really puts me and the Taiwan boy in a passive position. I should thank this firsthand experience for letting me see clearly the big gap between me and the Middle East students in English communicative competence.

I also see that the poor communicative competence in English is generally a common problem among the new students from China. Having received so many international students from everywhere, I can feel clearly that the majority of Chinese students have great difficulty speaking and understanding English. Their voice tends to be low, the tone is not firm, and seems not confident. A lot of students even don't have the courage to ask questions and seek help from the Peer Advisors when in trouble. For a lot of times, a simple question to a Peer Advisor would make things solved right away. However, they would rather ask each other among their Chinese peers than opening their mouths speaking English.

As a student who was once and is still in the same situation with them, I, once again, feel that what a disadvantaged place Chinese students take because of the damned communicative competence! The starting line is not the same. How many more efforts do they have to make to keep up with others in their study in the U.S.?

Not to mention these new students from China or the participants of the study— Bao, Xue, Hai, and Jin, I, an English major and then a university teacher who taught English for three years in China, have faced a great language challenge since the first day of my arrival in the U.S.. While living and telling the stories of the participants, my own lived and told stories become visible. A deep engagement with my personal narratives next to theirs makes connections between my experience and theirs, and helps uncover new understandings.

Before coming to America, I was once quite confident with my English proficiency as well as my knowledge about the culture and society of English-speaking countries. At least, I perceived myself better prepared for the life and study in the U.S. than most of the other Chinese students. However, the difficulties with the language especially communication using English still turn out far beyond what I expected before.

I may show a relatively high degree of fluency and ease of speech on topics relating to my particular interests and special fields of knowledge. Other than that, I have great difficulties speaking spontaneously, smoothly, and effortlessly. In unfamiliar or impromptu situations, I usually can not respond appropriately. On interactive occasions, my comprehension of other people's speech is sometimes not complete, and I specifically tend to miss cultural and local references. Furthermore, I am unable to advocate my

position at length. I can not sustain coherent structures in longer utterances. Errors occur in expressing somewhat complex ideas though may not interfere with understanding. My speech sometimes contains awkward or inaccurate phrasing of ideas, mistaken time, space, and person references, or in some way inappropriate, if not strictly correct, especially when under tension or pressure. Though as a former English teacher who used to teach all the grammar and vocabulary knowledge, I always can not recall it as I speak. Being driven to silence for vocabulary limitation or the lack of control of grammar often occurs. I even make mistakes with regard to very simple grammar and vocabulary I used to test my students, which is very embarrassing and frustrating.

Once in a semester, there were two courses in Language Arts I would love to take, both given by the same professor in the Department. One was a 6000 level course and the other was a 7000 level course. I went to the professor, seeking her advice regarding which course would be more appropriate for me or whether I could take both at the same time. Before that, I had several brief conversation exchanges with the professor when encountering her in the hallway of our college building and Department office. She was a very amiable and courteous person, and as a professor in Language Arts, she was also a fantastic language user. I could tell the efforts she made in trying to convey her opinions aptly without hurting my feelings. Though I can not remember the exact words she said, basically, she meant I'd better begin with the 6000 level course because my current English proficiency may not allow me to meet the requirements of the 7000 level course. She meant that though she did not know me well, my English speaking ability, had already suggested my overall English proficiency to her. To be honest, as a doctoral student I did feel a little bit embarrassed, but this feeling was just in a flash. Generally, I

felt it was good to know how my English proficiency, especially speaking ability, was perceived by a Language Arts professor. I appreciated her being frank, owing to which, I realized how far my speaking ability was from a decent level and what a considerable space there was for improvement.

At school, I find myself easily silenced among a group of people, especially when they use a lot of idioms and colloquialisms in their conversations. Sometimes, I feel that I understand each word they say but just do not get what they mean with these words. When I get totally lost and have no hope of figuring out what they are talking about, my mind will go blank, and all my previous preparations for the talk will become meaningless. Even though I do understand them and want to express my opinions, I have difficulties getting into the conversation. I have to transform the ideas into language, thinking about what words to use and how to organize them into grammatically correct English. When I am ready, people have gone on to a different topic and what I wanted to say has become irrelevant to the issue under discussion. When I do get ready to say what I wanted to say at the right time, there may be people talking on and on, and I do not know when is appropriate to take the turn. When I am hesitating, somebody else usually has jumped in and switched to another topic. I feel that I am always lagging one step or several steps behind. This experience and feeling are also very similar to those of the participants.

Moreover, like some of the participants, I consciously or subconsciously evade conversing with people using English, especially those superior to me, such as course instructors, professors, even my advisor. It's not because I dislike them or I am unsociable or any other reason, it is simply because I am so unsure of my English

communicative competence and hence afraid of revealing my poor communicative competence before them. If not indispensable, I try not to talk with them. Even when indispensable, I always find excuses to procrastinate talking with them. There have been several times that important things are deferred until nothing can be done except regret. Because of my escape from seeking counseling from them, I have to figure out almost everything on my own. It has proved to be not only burdensome but also misleading sometimes, resulting in a large amount of extra work which could have been completely avoided.

I know the importance of connecting with American peers and working closely with my advisor, class instructors, and other professors. However, thinking of my inability to understand what they say or my stumbling speech, I feel greatly reluctant to come by their office, say hello, and initiate conversations. There were times when I finally plucked up my courage to talk to them, but I was so nervous to death. Since the first minute I walked in their office, I felt like getting out of there as soon as possible, because the longer I stayed, the more likely my poor communicative competence would be exposed. Once I was out of their office, I habitually breathed out deeply, feeling such a relief for my communicative competence making me through another talk.

Largely due to my poor communicative competence, my life is very insulated from Americans. Similar to the participants, my friends are all Chinese, I go to Chinatown for shopping, hang out with Chinese, party with Chinese, and associate with the Chinese community. If outside school, I barely have any interactions with any American people. I even have an illusion at times that I were in China. I know I should make American friends and integrate into American life, but it's easy to be said than done.

The limit of my communicative competence restricts me within the topics of “business,” or slightly beyond “business;” otherwise, I’ll appear as a fool, unable to understand and respond appropriately and empathetically. At first, I felt stupid and embarrassed when everybody else was engaged in a lively talk and occasionally exploded with laughter while I “observed” everything quietly as an outsider. However, gradually, I have become numb and begun to resign myself to being silent all the time.

When I have not spoken a word for a long time at school, I feel a strong impulse to grab a person from anywhere to talk to in Chinese. On the one hand, I need to reassure myself that I am capable of communicating with people. Having somebody whom I can understand and who can understand me and think of me as an empathetic and witty conversationalist can help me restore my personal worth and re-boost the self-esteem that has somewhat shattered by the frustration experienced. On the other hand, it is a great comfort when I find that my Chinese peers have the same issues as me and I am not all alone.

There has been a vicious circle. The more I am distanced, the poorer my communicative competence; the poorer my communicative competence, the more I am distanced. The consequence is that I feel I have never fit into the American life, and have never found a place that belongs to me. To overcome this situation, my communicative competence is the first and foremost issue to address. I always wish that if I had a stronger communicative competence in English and were not so apprehensive about communicating using English, I would very probably have made greater achievements with less pain and efforts in both academic context and non-academic aspects of life.

Chapter 5 Stories Relived and Retold

Living and telling the stories of the participants and mine within the inquiry field is not enough. This chapter focuses on making meaning out of them by retelling and reliving. In narratively coding the field texts, asking questions, and deriving interpretations, something significant comes to light, underpinning and shaping the transition from field texts to research texts, and stories lived and told to stories relived and retold.

In the midst of a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space which is positioned somewhere along the dimensions of time, place, the personal, and the social, I am aware that in reliving and retelling the stories, my task is not so much to say that their English-using experiences are this way or that way but that they have a narrative history and are moving forward. In other words, their English proficiency is treated as *becoming* rather than *being* (Vinz, 1997). This is exactly how the study will inform China's English language pedagogies.

If the observations aim to address the English-using experience as being undergone in the here and now, the interviews are intended to situate their English proficiency on a continuum—their previous English proficiency, the English language education they received in China, their current self-perceived English proficiency, as well as the expectation for their future English proficiency, as contextualized within a historical narrative. Not only the participants, but also a larger educational landscape including more people, schools, and institutions will be embedded within this narrative of social science inquiry. Therefore, I treat myself as always in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories that make up the participants' English-using

experience, both individual and social. In the meanwhile, the research purpose is treated as trying to explore and describe the continuity and wholeness of the English-using experience of the participants, which eventually leads to this narrative.

Finally, coding categories are generated inductively from living and telling, and reliving and retelling of the participants' stories of experience, presenting both personal and social issues by looking inward and outward, and temporal issues by looking not only to the event but to its past and to its future. The stories relived and retold are presented under the following salient themes. They are (a) poor English communicative competence, (b) the impact of poor English communicative competence on academic achievement, (c) the impact of poor English communicative competence on social life, (d) the impact of cultural differences, (e) the nativeness principle vs. the intelligibility principle, (f) China's English language teaching: anything but communicative, (g) a call for the Communicative Language Teaching approach, and (h) implications for host countries.

Poor English Communicative Competence

When I set up the word "English" as the word in focus in the interview transcripts, and examined what words most frequently precede or follow it, either immediately or two, three and so on words away, the findings are: The word "English" is most likely to occur with the words such as "poor," "difficult," "mistakes," "not very active," "trouble," "dilemma," "not serve any real function," "not sufficient," "not enough," "limited," "catch up," "make up for," "haven't been adjusted," "mess," "frustrated," "deficiencies," etc. According to Fairclough (2003), this examination into the patterns of co-occurrence of words in texts is an important way of getting the semantic relations between the words.

The words that co-occurred most likely with “English” are all negative, which seems to suggest that the participants’ self-perceived English proficiency is negative.

This semantic finding corresponds with what the narrative inquiry unveils. Our deficiency in communicative competence in English is so striking, which stands out as the first prominent theme in reliving and retelling the stories. No matter in group discussions, classes, or seminars, none of us was able to engage in the academic discourses actively, especially on highly fast-paced and interactive occasions, because of the poor English communicative competence. All of us demonstrated inadequate competency in expression and comprehension in English, though the degrees of the difficulty may vary.

We could only use high-frequency words and common phrases, and simple sentences with the most basic grammatical structures in oral speech. We all had difficulty controlling vocabulary and grammar in long sentences. Except with rehearsed material, none of us was able to produce continuous discourse and maintain a degree of accuracy in language use, let alone any autonomy of expression, flexibility, or spontaneity. All showed nervous, unconfident, and uncomfortable in various degrees when speaking. For Bao, Xue, and Hai, their language resources were extremely lacking. Their speech in English was restrained by very limited vocabulary. Moreover, they displayed a great trouble making their utterances understandable.

In addition, we all had difficulty understanding English, especially when it was spoken using sophisticated or colloquial expressions. On the one hand, the cultural references, proverbs, the implications of nuances, and idioms were very unfamiliar to us; on the other hand, we had little understanding of the social conventions of conversations.

Our difficulty understanding the English spoken by the people from other non English-speaking countries was evident, too.

Generally speaking, our communicative competence was functional yet very limited. It was functional in the sense that it could satisfy predictable, simple, personal, and accommodation needs within the simplest of familiar contexts. Moreover, it could generally meet courtesy, introduction, and identification requirements, exchange greetings, and initiate and maintain predictable face-to-face conversations and satisfy limited social demands. It was very limited in the sense that it did not extend far beyond our immediate survival needs.

The limited communicative competence was definitely a big obstacle to academic achievement, and made our life in the U.S. difficult. All the participants claimed that their English communicative competence was far from sufficient for both academic and non-academic aspects of life, and was the language competence they needed to improve the most urgently. My own English-using experience confirmed this point, too. What is more, the poor communicative competence is very common among Chinese students in the U.S.. I felt it deeply when receiving international students as the Peer Advisor. The fact that over one half of the 20 students in the English Conversation Group Xue was “nominated” to attend were Chinese was also an indication of the universality of Chinese students’ insufficient English communicative competence. The following sections in this Chapter illuminates in detail what impact the poor communicative competence has exerted on the participants’ as well as my experience in academic study and social life in the U.S..

The Impact of Poor English Communicative Competence on Academic Achievement

One prominent feature of American university classrooms is the frequent interactive activities (Shi, 2011). Students are expected to engage in the intellectual exchange not only with the instructor but also with the class members. The spontaneous responses active participation in classroom activities requires raise a high demand for English proficiency especially communicative competence. However, the communicative competence of Xue, Bao, Hai, Jin, and mine as well, apparently, appears so insufficiently prepared to involve in the spontaneous interaction.

During the discussions, all of us were obviously quieter than their American peers, and were even silenced. Previous literature has different points of view regarding the silence of Chinese students in academic settings (Hsieh, 2007; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Shi, 2006). Some papers tended to project Chinese learners as reserved, reticent, and passive, and interpret Chinese students' silence based on cultural pre-dispositions that suggest voluntary withdrawal from interaction (Tatar, 2005). Others argued that Chinese learners are active learners, preferring a more interactive relationship, and "it is an overgeneralization to claim that Chinese students are reticent and passive learners" (Wang & Gao, 2008, p. 384). This inquiry into the English-using experience of Bao, Xue, Hai, and Jin, as well as my personal inquiry reveals distinctly that our silence in the communicative contexts is due not much to the cultural influence, but linguistic difficulties, as Jin said, "Language is the biggest reason for me not to be active."

All of us are willing to participate in all the academic activities, but due largely to the insufficient communicative competence in English, our chances of participation are considerably reduced. On the one hand, our self-consciousness of the weak spoken

English skills makes us lack confidence and be hesitant to participate; on the other hand, being unable to understand the instructors and peers also impedes us from participation. Moreover, our unfamiliarity with the communicative conventions in the U.S. is another important factor hindering us from participating in the group discussions as effectively as our American peers. Therefore, this narrative inquiry presents some counterevidence to the line of research that has simply reduced the reasons for Chinese students' passivity in English-speaking environment to the impact of traditional Chinese culture, educational philosophy, and practices.

While the communication difficulty and failure discourage Bao, Xue, Hai, Jin, as well as me from trying to learn from our instructors and peers in the academic settings, we are obliged to rely more on our personal efforts. To compensate for the insufficient communicative competence, we have to invest more time and energy after school. It is found that we all count on reviewing Powerpoint slides heavily to assimilate new knowledge or get necessary information so as to keep up with the pace of the class or the most recent development of the research field, rather than communicating with the instructors, peers, and colleagues. Communicating in the academic activities does not contribute to our academic growth as much as reading does because of our poor communicative competence in English.

The insufficient communicative competence adversely impacts our academic performance. It not only contributes to our passivity, but also to our commitment of extra efforts which could have been used to bring about more academic achievements. More importantly, it results in our unsatisfactory demonstration of academic competence, and prevented us from displaying our full potential.

Hai, while claiming the poor communicative competence in English to be a universal problem among Chinese student in their academic study in the U.S., said the following words, “When we Chinese students come to America, our biggest worry is language, English. It tremendously limits our ability to communicate and hence succeed.” If not for the poor communicative competence, Bao’s PI would not have been so concerned about his research career being spoiled; Xue may not have been so disheartened about being so easily outshined by his American peers; Hai would not have been defeated by an English speaking test time and again in order to be eligible for a graduate assistantship, and would have been able to display his academic knowledge and research capability as a teaching assistant; an ambitious student as Jin is, she would not have only anticipated to get a C-, and would not have been considered as “unprepared” for her inactivity in class discussions; and I would have been better integrated into the American life instead of being tormented for the feeling of being out of the place.

Regarding our passivity and silence, though it is not necessarily an indication of lack of knowledge or cognitive capacity, nor do we perceive ourselves as less competent than the native English-speaking peers in the academic and research field, our peers and instructors may still take us as unqualified or unprepared to be legitimate contributors in the learning environment, such as Jin’s potential failure of a course for being “unprepared.” As Ryan and Viete (2009) pointed out, although the sophistication of a student’s language may not be a good indicator of what the student has learnt, lack of sophisticated language still result in international students’ knowledge and abilities being unrecognized. A conclusion can be safely drawn that our poor communicative competence has overshadowed a large volume of our behind-the-scenes work, and

disadvantaged us to a great extent in academic settings, compared with other peers who are proficient in English.

In a word, our communicative competence is very insufficient for us to make effective communication, which constitutes a large obstacle to our active engagement in the academic settings. It decreases our opportunities to access learning resources, affects our academic achievement, and puts us at a great disadvantage. The negative experiences with communication can also quickly lead to a sense of exclusion from the learning community, and cause us to experience considerable distress.

The Impact of Poor English Communicative Competence on Social Life

A close examination into the participants' as well as my experience of using English shows that our poor English communicative competence not only affects our academic study, but also our social life. Because of the limited communicative competence, our everyday life in the U.S. becomes particularly difficult. Bao even struggled with handling everyday tasks using English, such as doing grocery shopping, ordering food in the restaurant, and asking directions on the street.

Though all of us perceived our poor communicative competence in English as the biggest hurdle to our academic achievements and professional development, however, as far as Bao and Jin felt, what constituted the greatest challenge for them in terms of the use of English in the U.S. was not the language challenge for academic purposes. Instead, the use of English beyond the academic study was where the greatest challenge was coming from. As Bao indicated, when suffering language difficulties in non-academic aspects of life, how much confidence can they have in using English in academic contexts?

An evident theme running through the participants' accounts of experience in social life as well as mine is the restriction of our interaction with Americans within the academic settings. Largely due to the limited communicative competence, our life after school can hardly reach out to Americans. We are more at ease with the use of English for academic and professional purpose than for social interaction. For all of us, life in the U.S. is very routine, which is not much beyond commuting between classroom, lab, library, and apartment. Except for academic activities, our interactions with American peers are usually confined to the level of superficial greetings. Outside the academic settings, we seldom come into contact with Americans, nor do we seek chances to utilize the social and cultural resources to enrich our life.

A collateral result is our distancing from the life of the American hosts and withdrawing to the Chinese community. Also largely due to the limited communicative competence, we have difficulty making friends with Americans and getting involved into their life. Neither the participants nor I report developing friendship with Americans, but remaining essentially unengaged with them apart from obligatory academic activities. Bao, Hai, Jin, and I all felt disappointed for not having developed more personal interactions and friendships with American colleagues because of the limit of our communicative competence.

Linguistically, we may need a great courage to initiate conversations with host-national strangers in English; to keep conversations going, it is even more nerve-racking and arduous. Hai, Jin, and I all have the experience of consciously or subconsciously evading conversing with people using English. It is understandable that if not necessary,

to be easy and relaxing, we prefer to stay within our native speech community than interact with American people using English.

Therefore, despite our expectations of engaging in an extensive intercultural experience in the U.S. and the awareness of the disadvantages of restricting ourselves to the Chinese community, the limit of our communicative competence makes it very hard for us to establish a deeper and closer relationship with Americans and integrate into the American life. All of us could not engage in any deep conversations with American people, but simply exchange of greetings and small talks. After some initial efforts and failures, we would feel very frustrated, and gradually withdraw to the Chinese groups, “sticking together” with our co-nationals. Moreover, our self-confidence and self-esteem which have been considerably undermined by the limit of communicative competence further accelerates a greater cohesion with our co-nationals. All these factors have made our social network mainly confined to the small sphere of the Chinese speech community, without much interaction with Americans.

The restriction of our social life within the Chinese community is also out of an emotional need. The social and emotional disconnection with the host people leads to our feelings of suffering and loss. Together with the huge stress and frustration from the academic study, we especially need our Chinese peers who can share our experience for socialization and emotional support. Through associating with our Chinese peers, we relieve our frustration, find acknowledgment as good students as we have always been regarded as, and regain self-confidence, which, might have been lost in our unsatisfactory English as a second language practices. These experiences also suggest that constrained by the poor English communicative competence, our physical presence in the U.S., to a

large extent, rather than enhancing intercultural communication and awareness, leads to the withdrawal into their national enclaves with reinforced notions of cultural separation.

The Impact of Cultural Differences

The participants' as well as my difficulty with communication in the U.S. is not completely caused by the poor communicative competence in English. For instance, Bao's difficulty distinguishing between sandwich and hamburger and Hai's discomfort with speaking in public, both can not simply be attributed to the factor of language insufficiency. The cultural differences between the U.S. and China can not be ignored while examining the participants' experience of using English in the English-speaking countries. As we come into a new linguistic as well as a new socio-cultural environment, our communicative norms and interactional style which are deeply rooted in Chinese cultural conventions may be very different from those in the U.S.. We all reported the lack of things in common as one of the reasons for our low level of social interaction with native-speaking people in communication. Though the narrative inquiry unfolds the prominence of our poor communicative competence which can by no means be overshadowed by the cultural differences, it does not negate the importance and necessity of exploring how culture affects our experience in the U.S. in addition to the language.

We are from a different learning culture which is very heavily influenced by Confucianism. It is generally believed that knowledge is in the textbooks, through which it is transmitted by teachers. Learning is a process of knowledge accumulation rather than knowledge construction and application. In conventional Chinese classroom interactions, students are expected to remain respectfully silent and speak only when they are asked to. "(S)ilence rather than communication and obedience rather than argument play a crucial

role in individuals' moral disposition and in maintaining the harmony of social order" (Shi, 2011, p. 584). Having been accustomed to sitting quietly in teacher-dominated classrooms, we have to admit that we are not as well prepared to speak publicly as American students.

Moreover, coming from a culture that values "face-saving," we are generally very conscious about our English proficiency. Keeping silent is therefore frequently used as a strategy of saving face and avoiding taking the risk of marring our public image. If we are not very sure about the rightness of our answers or opinions, we tend to keep silent rather than bringing them up, for the fear of being perceived negatively. As Shi (2011, p. 582) indicated, "Feeling insecure about the quality, accuracy, and appropriateness of their speech, they would rather keep a low profile by refraining from publicly displaying their language-related inadequacies."

All these factors can partly explain our passivity and reluctance in giving voice to our ideas. However, these distinguishing features in Chinese culture may conflict with the perceived norms of American communication which generally value direct participation and active contribution. This is also why Chinese students' silence is easily taken as evidence of incompetence or a negative attitude by American instructors as told of in Jin's story.

Furthermore, our substantial lack of the social and cultural knowledge of the U.S. is another significant reason for our communication difficulty. Our previous English language learning was all focused on grammar, lexis, and other linguistic knowledge, with little exposure to the wide socio-cultural picture of the English-speaking countries. Therefore, what we say may be grammatically correct but culturally inappropriate.

Moreover, our understanding of the subtle differences in the connotations the English idioms and expressions carry is, to a large extent, dependent on our acquaintance with the social-cultural knowledge of the U.S.. As Edwards, Ran, and Li (2007) indicated, “If students lack the relevant cultural schemas or frames of reference, their understanding will be impaired” (p. 391). Thus, our linguistic competence in the U.S. was fundamentally handicapped by our limited socio-cultural knowledge beyond the language *per se*.

To sum up, the differences in social, cultural, historical, and political contexts between the U.S. and China, as well as our large inadequacy in understanding the differences, collaboratively make our life in the U.S. difficult, no matter in academic or social aspects of our life. Misunderstandings may occur because of the differing ways of thinking and acting. If not for the difficulties arising from the cultural differences, it is very likely that we could have absorbed more information, been engaged in more interactions and network, and gained more important opportunities for academic and career development. This narrative inquiry further substantiates the essential value of the social and cultural knowledge of the English-speaking countries in English language teaching, a revelation that has been widely acknowledged by foreign language researchers (Barfield & Uzarski, 2009; Shin, Eslami, & Chen, 2011).

The Nativeness Principle vs. the Intelligibility Principle

For all the participants and me as well, making a presentation may not be a problem, since we can have what we want to say written down and remembered beforehand. However, what percentage of our oral speech can be understood by others so that the purpose of communication can be achieved is an issue of concern. One of the

audience members I interviewed only understood half of Bao's presentation because of not being used to his accent. Hai's numerous failures of school's English Speaking Test was also due to the grader's difficulty understanding his accent.

Having the stress, intonation, and tone that may sound strange to the native speakers especially those not in regular contact with foreigners, we sometimes have to repeat to make ourselves understood. As one professor I interviewed after Bao's presentation pointed out, accent may be a major barrier preventing Chinese students from being understood. We not only struggle with intelligibility but also comprehensibility. The diversity of accents in the U.S. constitutes a great challenge to us. We have a hard time understanding the people speaking with heavily accented English, especially those from different countries in the world.

Before coming to the U.S., we seldom had chances to be exposed to the real complexity of the configuration of different accents and varieties of English, and hence had very little awareness of the heterogeneity of English. As Marr (2005) indicated, students do not hear different accents of English in China's classrooms, because they are not expected to hear them. The British and American English have been traditionally considered as the only correct, or the most standard model of pronunciation in China's English language classrooms. The teaching of pronunciation in China is primarily confined within the "standard" English without taking the differentiated accents of English into consideration, not to mention different varieties of English in the other parts of the world, though they are increasingly common as English is becoming a global language worldwide.

Regarding the instructional models for pronunciation, Lewis (2005) pointed out two contradictory principles that have traditionally informed pronunciation teaching: the nativeness principle, whereby learners model a standard dialect from the United Kingdom or North America, and the intelligibility principle, whereby learners seek to be understood despite speech being heavily accented. The implicit norm in instruction has been the native speaker model. It has been promoted as the only internationally acceptable pedagogical models for English language teaching. Given this, a growing number of scholars have stressed the importance of an international version of English, recommending a shift of focus in the instructional model for pronunciation in English language teaching.

Firstly, the native speaker model carries power, and implies a historical authority over other varieties of English. Alptekin (2002) argued that “one cannot claim that there is one correct and appropriate way to use English, in the sense that one set of language patterns is somehow inherently superior to all the others” (p. 59). No accent, native or non-native, should be inherently superior to any other. Therefore, there should not be a single standard model set up for pronunciation teaching.

Secondly, the native speaker model fails to reflect the lingua franca status of English. We learn English not solely for the purpose of communicating with native speakers and understanding the native speaking culture. Instead, there are lots of opportunities of communicating with non-native English speakers from all parts of the world. As early as in 1997, Prodromou (1997) estimated that up to 80% of global communication in English takes place between nonnative speakers, let alone the days after ten years in the 21st century. Accordingly, as Alptekin (2002) suggested,

Real communicative behaviour ought to be redefined in relation to the reality of English as an International Language, entailing not only the uses of English that are real for its native speakers in English-speaking countries, but also the uses of English that are real for its nonnative speakers in communities served by languages other than English. (p. 61)

Thirdly, native-like speech, the generally-accepted goal of pronunciation teaching is neither attainable nor realistic for adult nonnative-speaking learners in the vast EFL countries to acquire. We tend to assume that the native accent is a reasonable and obvious choice to strive for as language learners. However, learners can sound American or British only if they live in these countries for a long time or are taught completely by native-speaking English teachers, both of which are almost impossible for most of the English learners in China (Scales, Wennerstrom, Richard, & Wu, 2006). Moreover, a native accent is unnecessary, either. A non-native speaker does not have to try to make himself or herself sound native to be intelligible to others. A speaker judged as having a foreign accent may not necessarily be rated as not comprehensible or not proficient.

Actually, a number of studies have questioned the claim that the goal of learning and teaching English in EFL settings is to aim toward a native variety of English (Ketabi & Shomoossi, 2007; Krashen, 2003; Timmis, 2002). The conventional model of EFL teaching, with its strict adherence to native speaker norms, is invalid in accounting for learning and using English as an international language in cross-cultural settings. An advisable lesson that can be drawn is that we should give enough emphasis to English as an international English, instead of purely restraining it within the frame of native speakers' norms. A new pedagogic model for the instruction of pronunciation is therefore

urgently needed to move beyond American or British English as the orthodox, embracing all the varieties of English to accommodate English as a means of international and intercultural communication.

The new pedagogic model would be a global intelligibility model which should be incorporated into a general foreign language curriculum. Rather than being confined within a single pronunciation model, the intelligibility model allows English language learners to hear, analyze, and compare key features among a variety of accents. While respecting for accent diversity, it increases both intelligibility and listening comprehension, and enhances communicative flexibility, so that learners can become more versatile in participating in a variety of interactions in a wide spectrum of international communication. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is the language teaching approach that best advances the intelligibility instructional model for pronunciation. Believing that sufficient input and output would help learners improve oral production and listening comprehension, it de-emphasizes a particular native accent or any single model of pronunciation, best tolerates a learner's localized accent as long as it remains intelligible to the international community, and therefore fully encourages learners to communicate in the target language to meet their communicative goals.

China's English Language Teaching: Anything but Communicative

This narrative inquiry into the participants' as well as my personal experience of using English in the U.S. clearly uncovers that China's English language teaching does not suit students' needs for communicative competence. Instead, it has constituted a large barrier that prevents students from possessing the ability to produce contextually appropriate language. Bao, Xue, and Hai all attributed their difficulty with

communication in English to China's English language teaching, which, in Bao's words, did not teach what he needed to function in the U.S.. Though Jin possessed a relatively high English proficiency, she did not give the credit to China's formal school English teaching, either; instead, she tended to ascribe it to her personal motivation and efforts.

Hu (2005b) pointed out that "(t)wo widely used methodologies in particular have been held accountable for students' lack of communicative competence in English after studying it for years" in China (p. 153). One is the grammar-translation method, while the other is audiolingualism, both characterized by systematic and detailed analysis of grammar, and the accuracy in language production (Hu, 2005b). Despite the lip service paid to communication as the target of foreign language learning by many language teachers, English language teaching and learning in China still "focuses heavily on language knowledge, not language skills, with the former being defined in terms of grammar and vocabulary and being taught predominantly in the mother tongue and through textbook material and grammar exercises" (Zhang & Mi. 2010, p. 383). In other words, the classroom instruction is still centered around facilitating the acquisition of formal properties of the language rather than skills to communicate effectively in that language. As Zhang and Mi (2010) summarized, "the actual training in listening and speaking skills remain largely a goal on paper" (p. 384).

As I recall the days I taught English as a foreign language in China, course objectives in the exemplar syllabus advocated by the majority of the colleagues were described primarily in linguistic terms that are easily testable. The classroom instruction had a strong focus on grammatical structures, narrowly defined at sentence level or in morphosyntactic features. Teaching materials were not task-based or reader-based. They

were not meaningful to learners in the sense that they did not teach students the language applicable to the world outside classroom. Reading was the major source of input, but students did not have many opportunities to transform the input into output. The opportunities to practice using the language to communicate were very few in the classroom. What many teachers called communication was more often than not the oral drilling of the target structures, preselected discrete lexical or grammatical items, rather than the “authentic,” “natural,” or “genuine” production of the language. It is no wonder that both Bao and Jin felt that China’s English language teaching was “boring,” “useless,” “meaningless,” and could not motivate them at all.

In general, in describing and deciphering Bao, Xue, Hai, Jin, and my stories, three specific themes are brought to light, pertaining to China’s English language teaching method. These themes reflect the most distinct problems in China’s English language teaching that result in the participants’ insufficiency in communicative competence. The three themes are (a) shortage of vocabulary, (b) over-correction of language forms, and (c) testing-oriented educational system, which are delineated as follows.

Shortage of vocabulary.

When asking the participants what their difficulties are in using English to communicate, shortage of vocabulary is one of the most commonly heard answers. I also have the same feeling. Our speech in English is very restrained by the limit of vocabulary. Our vocabulary in oral speech does not extend far beyond meeting the immediate basic needs, such as greeting people, expressing simple ideas, asking simple questions, and understanding simple statements. We all have difficulty finding the words for what we want to say. Expanding vocabulary is our common desire.

Ironically as Xue noted, classroom instruction in China has traditionally placed great emphasis on vocabulary. Vocabulary is an essential part in language learning process, and its importance has been widely recognized and well-established in China's EFL teaching. This narrative inquiry into the participants' experience of using English in the U.S. calls the efficiency of China's vocabulary teaching into a serious question.

The fact that Xue, though being able to memorize the whole textbook, and tell in what place a specific word appeared in the textbook, still had difficulties remembering what these words meant, fully reveals that, rote learning, the most frequently used strategy for learning vocabulary, is problematic. Dwelling on rote learning is basically a simple yet very passive process. It only enables learners to memorize or store the incoming information for later use, and does not involve any processes of understanding and interpreting the information that is learnt. As the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* defines, "Rote means memory or habit, rather than understanding. To learn something by rote, or rote learning means learning something in order to be able to repeat it from memory rather than learning it in order to understand it" (cited by Rashidi & Omid, 2011, p. 140).

Moreover, this kind of memorization only lasts for a short period of time. Students learn vocabulary by heart just for performing well on the tests. Fundamentally, it is like studying vocabulary for the sake of studying vocabulary, instead of for any real use. If a word learned is not to be used for the purpose of communication, either in oral form or written form, it will be very easily forgotten. Hai illustrated it quite well by saying that "(r)emembering vocabulary is fundamental. You have to know it, but that's

not enough for obtaining communicative competence. If we can't communicate using the vocabulary, what is the point of memorizing the vocabulary?"

Therefore, rote learning the vocabulary by itself does not necessarily lead to English fluency especially the communicative competence, and is not an effective way of learning vocabulary. This is why the participants, though taught to memorize a large vocabulary in China, still found their vocabulary considerably inadequate when using it in the U.S.. I, a former English language teacher, encountered the same problem, too.

Another important issue that has been long overlooked in China's vocabulary teaching is the limited varieties of the vocabulary covered. The participants were taught to remember a large number of words they described as "awkward," because these words were found rarely even never used in their life in the U.S.. In contrast, the words that are very commonly used in daily life appear to be unfamiliar to them, no matter how simple and basic these words are. He needed a wide vocabulary which involves a good knowledge of collocation, phrasal verbs, colloquial expressions and idioms, so that he can manage to handle the everyday communication. However, as Bao repeatedly emphasized, what he needed was not what he had been taught in China. This finding provides an important implication that in addition to guiding students to use different strategies in acquiring vocabulary and acquiring vocabulary through communication in different contexts, vocabulary teaching should also let students be exposed to different styles or registers of the language. Students eventually need to have a repertoire of different registers of the language rather than just one, the formal written one.

Over-correction of language forms.

In addition to the shortage of vocabulary, the participants also regarded their preconceived priority of producing flawless utterances and the fear of making mistakes as the obstacles that prevent them from making attempts towards speaking fluent English. As Hai said, “Before asking questions, I have to think about how to ask it in English, make sure that the grammar is right and I don’t make mistakes [in terms of language], and keep repeating the question over and over again in my mind before I finally find my courage and raise it.”

I feel the same way as Hai. Moreover, the more I am afraid of making mistakes, the more difficult it becomes for me to speak out. Because we are too much constrained by the formal considerations of the language, we need more time to consider in our brain how to transform the ideas correctly into language. During this process, we find ourselves always trying to search for the exact language forms from Chinese which are precisely equivalent to those in English. This is not only laborious, but also always turns out ineffective.

The overemphasis on linguistic form rather than meaning, to a large extent, results in our communication difficulty, and the production and exchange of less information, thus slowing the flow of conversation. Some participants over-monitored the language forms and caused the conversations to be painfully slow and sometimes difficult to follow. Hai even went to the point of avoiding speaking English, as he said, “I’m afraid of making mistakes. So I just keep avoiding speaking English.”

Too much emphasis has been placed on language form and accuracy in China’s English language teaching. Classroom feedback is mainly centered on accuracy in areas

such as vocabulary, morphology, and syntax, rather than meaning, appropriateness, interest, or relevance of the language used. Teachers set up themselves as an “authority,” from whom students are supposed to learn “flawless” language, and who correct students’ errors quickly, seeing it as the fulfillment of their duty as teachers. This discourages students from exploring and creating their own dialogues and students gradually become reluctant to try out what they have learned. As time passes, students form a latent consciousness that “don’t open your mouth until you’re 100% sure your utterance is error-free.” Thus, this mentality becomes the biggest roadblock that impedes students from using the language to communicate. As Reed, Brainerd, and Lee (2008) pointed out, “because it is a daunting task to learn another language, over-correction and bombardment with grammatical rules can lead the language learners to construct an affective filter of anxiety and low self-confidence that blocks language acquisition” (p. 9).

Therefore, the issue of over-correction is worthy of the introspection of China’s English language teachers, researchers, and policy makers: Should we put the focal point on accuracy or fluency? If it is hard to achieve both, do we want our students to end up being hampered from speaking even being mute intimidated by “accuracy,” or expressing themselves freely in spite of some minor errors that do not affect mutual understanding? Are these errors so important to the point that they must be corrected immediately otherwise comprehension will be affected? Between seeking zero error of the language form and discouraging students from practicing expressing themselves which is key to becoming a proficient communicator, which should be opted for?

Testing-oriented educational system.

All the participants pointed out the testing-oriented educational system as one of the most prominent factors responsible for their poor English communicative competence. Passing the various obligatory exams so as to satisfy the requirements for promotion to a higher level of education is the major indicator of students' academic success, which is also the major driving force for Chinese students to study English. At the secondary schools, everything serves the College Entrance Exam because it is the single determining factor of whether a student can enter a higher education institution and what kind of institution he or she will be admitted to. At the post-secondary level, all students are required to pass the College English Test Band 4 which is considered by most of the universities as compulsory for qualifying for the Bachelor's degree. College English Test Band 6 is taken on a voluntary basis, but is highly valued in the job market. All these tests are nationwide, administered by the National Testing Committees on behalf of the Chinese Ministry of Education. Apart from the tests for academic purpose, even the employers working for various government-supported institutions need to take English tests when seeking for promotion.

As Cheng (2008) pointed out, Chinese society in general accepts all kinds of tests as a fair indicator of students' academic success, and consequently both teachers and students make passing the tests their goal of English teaching and learning. Constrained by the demands of these high-stakes tests, both school curriculum and classroom instruction eye on the enhancement of students' test-taking techniques rather than students' real ability of using the language in different contexts. With teachers and

students both driven solely by the instrumental motivation, the true goal of language teaching and learning has been disoriented (Choi, 2008).

The underperformance in the English-speaking environment of the participants who represent the best test takers in China show that the tests have been designed to go anywhere but the development of students' communicative competence which they need most in authentic English-speaking country. Zheng and Cheng (2008) suggested that with the fast increasing number of Chinese students studying in English-medium universities around the world outside China, the impact of the tests on Chinese students' English learning should go beyond its intended use and consequences on Chinese society alone.

All these tests emphasize reading and language form while overlooking speaking and listening. Speaking has been ruled out by all the tests all along. Though listening is tested, its proportion on the tests is not enough, and accordingly, the attention given to it in classroom instruction is not enough, either. Moreover, the listening part does not take the development of students' listening comprehension for "pure" English communication as the starting point. Instead, it is designed for testing whether students have mastered a certain level of vocabulary and grammar as required by the syllabus.

Basing assessment on the mastery of vocabulary and grammatical structures sends a clear message to teachers as well as students about where priorities of learning English lie. Therefore, it is not surprising that though all the participants represent the cream of the crop in China who have gone through all levels of tests successfully, but still self-evaluate their English proficiency especially the communicative competence as the worst among all non-native English-speaking students around them in the U.S., and regard speaking as their most vulnerable piece of the four language skills. This is also why

Chinese students are usually characterized as hard-working and diligent, with high scores but low communicative competence, under the test-driven educational system. In a word, directing all focus on grammatical knowledge, the high-stakes tests are undoubtedly one of the biggest reasons for the shocking deficiency of the participants and me as well in using English to communicate in real life in the U.S..

In general, the traditional English language teaching methods characterized by grammatical analysis, translation, and intensive reading as a basis for language teaching content, to put it in Hai's words, contributes to "anything but communication." What is worse, rather than facilitating communication, it, in reality, restrained Hai from communicating freely. Bao's words summarized China's English language teaching well,

The English language education in China is not for the purpose of communication at all, though everybody knows that language teaching should serve for the success in communication in that language, and this should be the goal of language teaching.

A Call for the Communicative Language Teaching Approach

After studying English for so many years in China, instead of being versed in English, all the participants and I as well faced immense challenges from the insufficiency of using English to communicate in the authentic English-speaking environment. Our inability of transforming the linguistic knowledge learnt in China's classroom into communicative competence stands out very evidently through telling, living, retelling, and reliving our experience of using English in the U.S.. In this globally competitive context with English as the lingua franca, people may very well be

obstructed from reaching the height of success they could have reached because of the shortcomings in the communicative competence. This, actually, has been experienced by all of us in our past days in the U.S..

How frustrated I was when my performance on the volunteer job as the Peer Advisor was greatly impaired by the limit of my communicative competence? How many times I was extremely sad for being silenced in a group of people and appearing as a “fool”? How deplorable it was when Xue was outshined by his American peers simply because of his poor communicative competence? How depressed Xue was when simultaneously “nominated” by both his supervisor and Department Chair to participate in an English Conversation Group? How strongly Bao wished that his former English teachers in China had taught him the language practical and useful for his communication in the U.S.! What a regret it would be if Xue failed the Qualifying Exam because of his poor English communicative competence, Hai lost the opportunity of gaining graduate student assistantship simply because of the numerous failures on the speaking test, and Jin failed a course because of being silent and the perception that she was not prepared?

In a nutshell, our limited communicative skills in English not only seriously restricted our opportunities of obtaining learning resources and academic success, but also made our daily life difficult. In other words, we are very insufficiently prepared for the communicative competence required for not only the academic and career development but also the social life in the English-speaking contexts. China’s classroom practice and assessment methods that contribute to anything but learners’ communicative competence are what accounts for our astonishing insufficiency in communicative competence.

All the participants conveyed their regret for not having paid enough attention to the development of communicative competence while learning English in China. When asked to give suggestions to China's English language learners, all of them pointed out the necessity of practicing communicative skills. Actually, not only the participants in this narrative inquiry, some previous studies also showed that feeling China's traditional English classes boring and useless, Chinese students' preferences are more inclined toward the communicative-oriented teaching (Gan, Humphreys, & Hamp-Lyons, 2004; Littlewood, 2010).

The urgent wish to improve communicative competence explicitly voiced by the participants reflects a crucial call for the enactment of the Communicative Language Teaching approach in China's English language teaching. It is the best solution to respond to Hai's iterated request that "Somebody gets to fix it." The goal of language teaching should be enabling learners to use the language effectively for real communicative needs, rather than simply providing learners with the knowledge about the linguistic system of that language. For the achievement of this goal, the Communicative Language Teaching approach is needed to foster a learner-centered and communication-oriented language instruction in a supportive, non-judgmental, and non-threatening classroom atmosphere.

In the era of globalization with English as the lingua franca, there has been a consistently escalating demand for competent English users. As China develops and is more frequently in contact with other parts of the world, a large pool of English-proficient human resources is needed to help China access the cutting-edge scientific and technological advancement in the world, deepen China's relationships with other

countries, facilitate its integration into the global economy, and heighten its international competitiveness. In response to such an increasingly pragmatic demand for English, traditional English teaching approaches in China can no longer suffice. Instead, the Communicative Language Teaching approach must be enacted.

As perceived by Bao, Hai, Jin, and me as well, the pragmatic language that can be directly used in daily life with English as the medium of communication is what we need most. It is the language skills that enable us to function in different contexts, no matter in classroom, lab, conference, restaurant, bank, post office, hospital, or grocery, etc. These language skills may only need to satisfy a simple conversation, which is no more than a small talk, but they are the most important for us, yet what we lack most, because they are not what is taught in China unfortunately. What China's English language teaching does teach is too distant from this type of everyday language, simple yet most useful to learners. Its textbooks are highly fixed in formal genre featuring complex sentence structures and elevated literary wording. The language varieties exposed to the students are very scarce. Students are vastly inadequate in the colloquial speech, idioms, and other varieties of English which are indispensable for conducting successful communication in the English-speaking settings.

With a heavy emphasis on the teaching of grammar, students supposedly should have been equipped with a modest mastery of the structure and usage of English. However, the narrative inquiry into the participants' and my English-using experience discloses that it is not truth. The knowledge of grammatical structures does not necessarily produce good communicators using English. The root reason is that the reading-oriented and exam-driven grammar teaching in China is never embedded in the

soil of authentic discourses. In other words, it is not targeted at applying the universal grammatical knowledge to individual utterances eventually.

Bao pointed out that simply addressing grammar without giving students opportunities to practice using the grammar for communication was the major reason for his very limited communicative competence in English. In telling of his stories, Xue expressed the same opinion,

I think China's English teaching method has problems. Grammar teaching simply stays at the theoretical level. When applied to real life, it becomes an entirely different matter. Teachers should not teach grammar only. What is more important is teaching students how to apply the grammar knowledge to communication.

The purpose of grammar teaching should be supplying students with the grammar rules used for communication. Therefore, they should be taught with reference to meaning, social factors, discourse, or a combination of these factors. As Rao (1996) indicated,

Grammar is a tool or resource to be used in the comprehension and creation of oral and written discourse rather than something to be learned as an end in itself. It is not enough for Chinese teachers to let students understand what the grammar rules are and just stop at that (p. 469).

The Communicative Language Teaching is the language teaching approach that can best address all these issues inherent in China's current English language teaching. It

enables students and teachers to get together to create a learning community engaged in a common communicative goal. In this community, “teachers are expected to be facilitators of communication, needs analysts, organizers of resources, guides of procedures and activities, researchers, and learners, while learners are required to be negotiators, communicators, discoverers, and contributors of knowledge and information” (cited by Feryok, 2008, p. 154). While teaching the linguistic forms, the underlying aim is to cultivate the communicative functions the linguistic forms carry in different contexts. Therefore, priority is assigned to communicative use of language above the controlled manipulative drills. Learners are given ample opportunities to practice structuring their interactions and performing communicative tasks using these linguistic forms learned in ways that are learner-centered and content-driven. The involvement in the communicative activities is not only a vital source of linguistic input but also a tool to facilitate language acquisition. In this way, the Communicative Language Teaching approach allows larger doses of language input, greater learner autonomy, authentic interactions, more relevant teaching content, and hence stronger communicative competence.

Moreover, highlighting the importance of using the target language exclusively or predominantly in stimulating language acquisition, the Communicative Language Teaching approach maximizes the amount of exposure to the target language in China’s EFL classrooms. Despite a marked increase in opportunities for students to come in contact with authentic spoken and written English via the internet, television and DVDs, English is still not widely or regularly used as a communication tool in China (Henrichsen, 2007). For Chinese students, there are few genuine English communicative

contexts outside classroom, so creating the atmosphere of using the language in class becomes a priority, which is one of the key tenets of the Communicative Language Teaching. It focuses on the centrality of the classroom as the main source of linguistic input and the primary site of language development. In this regard, the Communicative Language Teaching is particularly relevant in the foreign language context, where students have limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom. Moreover, it can best develop students' enthusiasm and intrinsic motivation for learning English in EFL contexts instead of letting English learning reduce to a product of curricular demands, pressure from exams, academic and professional success.

Although problems may occur in the transfer of the Communicative Language Teaching from ESL to EFL contexts, and there does exist the difficulties in developing students' communicative competence in EFL contexts, such as the overlarge class size, lack of communicative needs, and teachers' deficiency in English proficiency, etc., as demonstrated by an in-depth literature review, it does not mean that communication should not be the goal of foreign language instruction and CLT should be abandoned accordingly. Attending to learning contexts is one of the most basic principles in education, with no exception in the field of English language teaching. However, contexts is an important element taken into account in decision-making with reference to curriculum design and classroom practice, but not the determining one above methodological issues.

Enacting CLT does not deny that a teaching approach should be eclectic and classroom instruction should be localized. With CLT as the central teaching method, context is not marginalized; instead, it should be sufficiently considered in rendering

CLT the most beneficial to the local conditions in China. Though the innovation may take a rather long time, and the path may not be smooth, given the largely potential utility of the Communicative Language Teaching approach to China's English language learners and its national development, no challenges can restrain teachers from enacting it in classroom.

In the meanwhile, the traditional teaching approaches which may seem out of date in the eyes of the language educators in the west, are not all backward or negative, and can not be simply dismissed. As this narrative inquiry reveals, despite the explicit demerit with regard to the preparation for students' communicative competence, China's English language teaching has its merit. Its teaching of reading deserves credits. As the language skill that constantly takes up the foremost place in China's ELT, the teaching of reading skill has achieved remarkable success. None of us reported to have encountered problems with reading. We all regarded reading as the strongest and least challenging among the four language skills, and even heavily rely on reading to make up for their weakness in listening ability in academic study. Moreover, its teaching of the linguistic forms has laid students a solid foundation for further language development.

As Rao (1996) suggested, what might be called "traditional" is not fundamentally or necessarily unworkable alongside modern EFL teaching approaches. They are not mutually exclusive. Beaumont and Chang (2011) even challenged the dichotomy between the traditional and communicative approaches, arguing that what is the most helpful for teachers is to "define more precisely what it is they are doing in the classroom, how that might be justified in terms of language learning outcomes, ..." (p. 299). The implications for China's English language teaching is that while firmly enacting the Communicative

Language Teaching approach, a feasible and practical way should be pursued to achieve a productive blend of the development of both communicative competence and linguistic knowledge in China's educational contexts.

Implications for Host Countries

This narrative inquiry not only sheds some light on China's English language teaching but also brings about implications for the educational institutions in host countries. Rather than being "met half way" by the faculty, staff, and fellow students in the U.S., the host country of the participants, as a reaching out towards the facilitation of the cross-cultural engagement, the participants seem to be left to find their way out through their own efforts. There is little recognition of the intense difficulties and frustrations non native-English-speaking students have experienced and are experiencing from the educators of the host country. Instead, Ha (2009) indicated that "international students are often blamed for their deficit and thus expected to adjust themselves to 'new' educational contexts in the host country" (p. 203). Lee and Rice (2007) even contended that international students' difficulties are caused as much by the different forms of discrimination and racism that have been practiced against them. In the same vein, Paulus, Bichelmeyer, Malopinsky, Pereira, and Rastogi's (2005) case study found that participants reported that Americans "were not patient enough to listen to (their) contribution," and "assume leadership and hold decision-making power by default of being American" (p. 52).

In the stories told and retold, lived and relived, some faculty expressed their concern and dissatisfaction with the participants' English ability, and urged them to improve, while most of the instructors simply appeared to be or chose to be unaware.

Except the English Conversation Group launched by the graduate school at Xue's university for enhancing international students' English communicative skills, the lack of support and accommodation to the international students' difficulties not only in terms of language but also other consequent aspects is very evident in the educational institutions in the host country. This section discusses what the educational institutions in the host country need to do to help international students more linguistically proficient and socio-culturally empowered.

Though it is reasonable that it is the international students' own responsibility to overcome the limited communicative competence to be able to meet the academic requirements and best assimilate into the life of the host country, this process may demand the understanding, sensitivity, and efforts on the host community's side, beyond the international students' unilateral endeavor. This narrative research "points to the need for educators who work with non-native English speaking international students to address not just academic but also relational and affective issues of these students" (Halic, Greenberg, & Paulus, 2009, p. 92). It is vitally important that supportive resources are made available to the Chinese students at an early stage of their study, focusing on speaking and listening, and academic writing skills, especially for the linguistically demanding courses. In addition to the language support, universities can also design and offer fine-grained intervention strategies to help overseas students build up contact and relationships with host students and the people in the local community, create more opportunities for international interaction, and facilitate multicultural networks. It is equally crucial that the faculty and administrators working with the growing body of international student population on campus enhance their understanding of the challenges

international students may face, provide a little bit more emotional support and empathy, and promote a more multivoiced learning space for them.

This narrative inquiry also showed that both the participants and I were very open to new experiences and sought opportunities for self-improvement and more involvement initially, in spite of the lack of linguistic competence and confidence. If the educational institutions of the host country can be more sensitive to the difficulties international students may undergo linguistically and culturally, more appreciative of their efforts and contributions, and give more respect to different ways of knowing and communicating knowledge, they would display greater willingness and ability to overcome the linguistic challenges, get adapted to the cultural differences, and integrate into the host country's academic and social life. It is also essential that other parties involved work together to make the environment more positive to international students, for the purpose of improving their educational experiences in the host country.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

Concluding Remarks

The previous literature never lacks the investigations into the study abroad experience of international students in English-speaking countries (Cheng, Myles, & Curtis, 2004; Tatar, 2005; Zhang & Mi, 2010). In these research studies, Chinese students have often been reported to have experienced a wide range of challenges from culture shock, different learning styles, lack of language skills, etc. (Halic, Greenberg, & Paulus, 2009; McMahon, 2011; Sakthivel, 2003; Wen & Clement, 2003). Among these challenges, English proficiency is always identified as one of the biggest preventing Chinese students from achieving a greater academic success and getting more accustomed to the host country' life (Edwards, Ran, & Li, 2007; Hellsten & Prescott, 2004; Huang, 2006; Zhu, 2003).

Compared with these existing studies, this narrative inquiry, through telling, living, retelling, and reliving the language-related experience of four participants from China as well as that of mine, while confirming the previous findings, focuses on exploring and addressing the communicative difficulties encountered by Chinese students in the U.S.. It presents how our inadequate command of English especially communicative competence has affected our academic learning and non-academic aspects of life. Our communicative competence is found unable to meet the various social and academic demands in the U.S..

All of us have difficulties verbalizing our thoughts, and making our speech intelligible, especially when the topic under discussion does not bear directly on our particular specialty or interest, though the degrees of difficulty may vary. We also have

difficulties with English comprehension, especially that of different accents. Our weakness in idioms and colloquialisms is manifest, too, which primarily results in our striking lack of language resources for communication. In brief, our academic and social engagement is both prohibited seriously by our poor communicative competence. A growing body of research has documented the specific language needs of Chinese students in English-speaking countries, notably in speaking and listening, and has corroborated the findings of this narrative inquiry (Marr, 2005; Yang, 2003).

It is evident that China's English language teaching does little help for us in performing various communicative tasks in the U.S.. As Yu and Wang (2009) pointed out, Although the purpose for EFL teaching is explicitly stipulated in the recent EFL curriculum and pedagogy reform, to develop not only learners' linguistic knowledge but also their communicative competence, ..., classroom practices in the Chinese context are still teacher-dominated, textbook-focused and exam-oriented rather than student-centered and communicative-oriented (p. 465).

There is a clear mismatch between the language we learned/I taught in China and the language we encountered in the U.S.. What China traditionally teaches is far removed from what is used in everyday life in the English-speaking countries. How it is taught cannot equip students to deal with the various academic and social demands in English-speaking countries, either.

Our perceived need for communicative competence, has explicitly underlain a vital call for enacting the Communicative Language Teaching approach in China's EFL classrooms. The Communicative Language Teaching approach is urgently needed to help students overcome hindrances to higher involvement in English discourses, no matter in

academic contexts or in social life. While gaining valuable insights regarding how to improve China's English language teaching from the perspective of Chinese students in the U.S., this study also has the potential of helping future students from China better prepared for their English proficiency in English-speaking environment.

In view of the ongoing trend of international students coming to study in North American universities, scholars are showing growing interest in the language-related issues of international students, and have conducted plentiful research using diverse methodological and theoretical frameworks (cited from Shi, 2011). However, few of the research studies have employed narrative inquiry as the methodology and examined international students' language-using experiences for the purpose of informing the English language pedagogy in their home countries. Utilizing narrative inquiry, this study delineates the participants' as well as my personal experiences on an individual case basis and on our own terms which is difficult to achieve using other methods. Through prioritizing the depth and richness of the stories, the dynamics and complexity of our experiences are made visible.

Although this narrative inquiry makes no attempt to generalize, similarities in our experiences suggest some common, if not universal, patterns and themes. The call for CLT is not specific to China's English language teaching; instead, it transcends national boundaries and sparks global concerns, as "it opens the door for researchers in other nations to begin to explore a similar phenomenon in their national contexts" (Clandinin & Hamilton, 2010, p. 1115). It fosters international connections, which points to a broad concern in language education field pertaining to the enactment of CLT, an imported language pedagogy from ESL to EFL classroom. As a powerhouse of English language

teaching and learning in the world, China's educational enterprise is doomed to make critical contributions to the English language teaching research and development in a wider context, as it may help to inform other English language teaching professionals in similar contexts of the indispensability of CLT.

According to Bruner (1990), a good story should be open to different interpretations, letting different people fill in the gaps with their own experiences and knowledge. Conle (2000) echoed this viewpoint by arguing that it is essential for narrative inquiry that "whatever sense of closure may convey the end of a narrative, it must remain open-ended and available for re-telling, by the inquirer or by others" (p. 53). Therefore, it is my hope that this narrative inquiry will provide a new lens by which readers entering into the EFL teaching field take away the meanings that become their own, and prompt ongoing further storying of experiences in readers as well as me, the researcher.

Limitations of the Study

One inevitable source of the limitations of the study is the difficulty with self-perceiving one's own English proficiency. Bruner (1996) pointed out that "it is widely recognized that learners may find it difficult to be objective about their own language level, or that they may not have the necessary expertise and experience to make informed judgments" (p. 3). If this is true, foreign language learners may have greater difficulties self-perceiving their language level accurately (Blanche & Merino, 1989).

Moreover, there are many factors that may affect the accuracy of our self-perceptions of English proficiency, ranging from our individual attributes such as personality traits, affectivity, motivation, expectation, varying degrees of self-esteem and

self-confidence, to our past grades of the English language tests (Butler & Lee, 2006; Ross, 1998). All these factors make it difficult to discern the nuances of to what extent our English communicative competence and its impact on our academic and social life are due to other factors than China's English language teaching. For instance, Bao once mentioned his personality in accounting for his silence in academic settings,

Sometimes, my silence is not totally caused by my limited communicative competence. I'm not a person who likes to express myself. If I have opinions or suggestions, perhaps I will not speak them out, no matter how good they are. I prefer to be silent. This is my personality.

What is more, our self-perceived performance of using English may also be closely related with the demands of our academic disciplines for English proficiency. Some academic disciplines are more linguistically demanding, and more sensitive to language proficiency, or proficiency in certain language skills. For example, Jin's Master's program notably requires a relatively high proficiency in speaking and writing, which accounts for a large part of the setbacks and frustration she experienced in using English.

Another factor that may influence our self-perceived English proficiency and a consequently impartial understanding of China's English language teaching is the length of time we have stayed in the U.S.. Language skills improve over time if they are used constantly, especially in a second language environment. Certain language difficulties we experienced early on in the U.S. may have diminished or even disappeared with the passage of time. Our use of English at the time of the study may inevitably be inseparable

from our exposure to English in the English-speaking contexts, not simply the product of our home country's English language teaching.

In addition, culturally related factors can not be neglected, either. People in some cultures have a tendency to overrate themselves while people in other cultures tend towards underestimation (Blue, 1994). Moreover, it is also possible that more proficient language learners tend to underrate their performance while the less proficient learners tend to overestimate their performance (Blanche & Merino, 1989; Taras, 2001). Therefore, in living, telling, reliving, and retelling our stories, our self-perceived performance of using English may very well be affected by some factors impertinent to our true English proficiency, and hence should be interpreted with caution.

The limits inherent in the method of narrative inquiry constitute another source of the limitations of the study. Firstly, the prominence given to the participants' and researcher's voices and the heavy reliance on the establishment of a research relationship between the participants and the researcher both cause narrative inquiry to have to play a "believing game" (cited from Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4), which results in an irresistible limit of the findings gained from this research method. Secondly, a narrative inquiry is not generalisable, nor is it intent to be generalisable. This study is restricted to the participants from China and targeted at China's English language teaching. Plus, a small-scale study as it is, any attempt to transfer the findings to the decision-making in other contexts ought to be made with special caution. Thirdly, for a good narrative researcher, having merely a discerning mind, sensitive heart, and keen eyes and ears is not enough. He or she should be not only competent in capturing the depth under the surface and the background behind the foreground in living, telling, reliving, and retelling

the stories, but also be competent in describing and reporting the narrative in a graphic and lifelike way. This unavoidably raises a higher demand for the narrative inquirer's language proficiency, which is my deficiency as a non-native user of English.

As Craig and Olson (2002) indicated, "While narrative approaches unearth complexities, help people to manage dilemmas, and elucidate more fully the human condition, they offer no quick answers" (p. 128). As "a continual unfolding" of life (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 9), it is an ever-unreachable goal to exhaust all the possible meanings in a narrative inquiry. Though a limit ostensibly, it is also where the greatest vitality of a narrative inquiry lies in, because it is in this endeavor that human knowledge goes broader and deeper.

Further Research

After gaining an affirmative answer for the research question whether the Communicative Language Teaching approach should be enacted in China's EFL classroom, the subsequent issue that needs to be investigated in the future would naturally be "how," namely, how CLT should be enacted to make it fully play its strengths within the potentials and constraints of Chinese contexts. Many contextual factors exist that may work against the enactment of CLT in China, such as the overlarge classroom size, lack of communicative needs, testing-oriented educational system, the traditional classroom norms, etc. We need to be aware that the prerequisite of enacting CLT is acknowledging the array of diverse contexts in which the English language teaching in China is situated.

No brand-new imported pedagogies can grow out of the indigenous soil without being incorporated into the native elements and striking a balance. Any attempt to teach English in the communicative way in China without taking these constraints into account

would lead to failure. Therefore, among many other future research directions to be addressed, the first and foremost should be the empirical research into the local responses or adaptation practices of CLT in China. In this body of research, there are many issues vitally important yet under-researched and insufficiently discussed in the literature, all aiming for exploring the ways of making CLT more applicable in Chinese contexts.

Another issue that deserves the attention of researchers is the pressing need of teacher preparation and development. The success in any reform of pedagogy is unlikely to happen without the efforts of classroom teachers, alongside students and researchers. Blessings come with challenges. As China's English language teaching undertakes CLT, teachers will be inevitably facing unprecedented challenges, such as the insufficiency of their own communicative competence, and a great range of learners, learning, and teaching circumstances. All these challenges require not only the "flexibility and reflexivity on the part of educators who attempt to introduce new curriculum and implement new teaching methods in China" (Wang & Gao, 2008, p, 389), but also the teachers who are to enact the pedagogy in the classroom.

Bao, Xue, Hai, and Jin all pointed out the insufficient English proficiency of their English teachers in China. Bao stated the issue quite well, "We need teachers who not only know English, but also really communicate in English and teach us to communicate." In this light, more professional development opportunities should be created for teachers, from which, both pre-service and in-service teachers can strengthen their English proficiency, especially communicative competence, to meet the higher linguistic demand of enacting CLT in classroom. In this vein, they can also get in contact

with the up-to-date research on CLT and other most recent development in English language teaching worldwide.

In this undertaking, the teacher as curriculum maker image should be given priority, which has been disregarded in the existing literature on China's curriculum reform, and would definitely ruin the successful enactment of CLT, if not modified. Clandinin and Connelly (1992) indicated that "teacher is an integral part of the curriculum constructed and enacted in classrooms" (p. 363). Top-down curriculum dissemination cannot guarantee success; instead, pedagogical innovations can only be accomplished from inside, by the self-deliberation and reflection of teachers "as holding, using, and producing knowledge" (Craig, 2006, p. 261), as they work together with students and researchers. Hiep (2007) suggested that "CLT should not be treated as a package of formulaic, prescriptive classroom techniques" (p. 200). Grounded in a sound understanding of their conditions, teachers should be empowered to develop their idiosyncratic ways of interpreting and translating CLT in classroom instruction, and make informed and effective instructional decisions that are within the communicative approach. Accordingly, an emerging body of research should revolve around "the telling and retelling of the curriculum stories arising from their individual curriculum-making/curriculum-living experiences with particular groups of children in specific milieus" (Craig, 2006, p. 288).

Furthermore, in an endeavor to understand Chinese students' experience of using English in an English-speaking country, this narrative inquiry limits its investigative scope mainly to the perspective of the Chinese participants. The perspective of the university faculty, staff, and their native-speaking peers who have direct contact with

them deserves further research. What Chinese students perceive as problematic in their use of English may not necessarily be a problem from the point of view of the native-speaking educators and peers. Likewise, what Chinese students perceive to be no problem may be a big problem in the eyes of the native-speaking people. To gain a holistic picture of how China's English language teaching has prepared students for their English proficiency in an English-medium context, it is valid as well as indispensable to examine the points of view of the educators and other people involved in the host country.

Further research can also be conducted to ascertain whether similar findings emerge with a large population of Chinese students employing quantitative methods or mixed methods. It is also helpful to carry out more longitudinal studies, in order to gain an understanding of the long-term effect of China's English language teaching on students' use of English in the English-speaking environment. A comparative study on the performance of using English between Chinese students and the international students from other EFL countries can also provide useful insights on China's English language teaching as well as the EFL teaching overall.

At the conclusion of the dissertation, I would like to present a poem by Ryan and Viète (2009) which describes very movingly the rugged journey that many international students not only the students from China may have taken in terms of the use of English in a linguistically and culturally different country. Poignant as it is, the poem depicts the most incisively and thoroughly the pains of "vulnerability and powerlessness" (Ryan & Viète, 2009, p. 311) I have experienced and I believe all my participants have, too. These pains profoundly rooted in the depth of my heart unceasingly remind me of the

significance of enacting the Communicative Language Teaching approach in China's English language classrooms.

On Studying in English

Once I felt I shared my mind with others

Now I sob behind closed doors,

Desperation

Muted in the fall of water.

How to understand, be understood

In mind and soul?

My tongue lies frozen

Between

The slipperiness of words

And the passion to be heard,

To be more than a child

In an adult game.

One day I feel

Part

Of the conversation,

Another, like oil on water

A puddle of otherness.

Some days I grasp the words

And we dance

(cited from Janette Ryan and Rosemary Viete, 2009, p. 312)

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