

English, Education, and Life: A Narrative Inquiry into the English-using Experience of Chinese Graduate Students in the U.S.

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Abstract: *Using narrative inquiry, this article investigates the English-using experience of three Chinese students in American graduate school. Exploring and addressing the communicative difficulties they encountered in the U.S., this narrative inquiry presents how inadequate command of English skills especially communicative competence has affected the participants' academic learning and non-academic aspects of life. It depicts vividly how the participants have been prevented from achieving a greater academic success and integrating into American life, due to the lack of English communicative competence. While gaining valuable insights into the criticalness of enacting the Communicative Language Teaching approach in China's EFL classrooms, this narrative inquiry also provides important implications for the educational institutions in the host countries in their endeavor to help international students improve their study abroad experience.*

Key words: *narrative inquiry, English skills, academic learning, non-academic aspects of life*

Introduction

A report released by the Council of Graduate Schools in the U.S. 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). The latest China's Ministry of Education figure in 2012 indicated a total of 339,700 Chinese students studying abroad in 2011 (China's Ministry of Education, 2012). As an increasingly significant number of Chinese students pursue further education in the English-speaking countries, a growing body of research has arisen, examining the language-related issues of these Chinese students. Among these research studies, some specifically looked to Chinese students' listening and/or speaking skills which are/is considered to be their biggest barrier to academic success (Huang, 2006); some investigated their difficulties with communication from the socio-cultural perspectives (Holmes, 2006; Liu, 2001); some explored the multilayered factors influencing their silence/reticence in 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).

However, few works have investigated how Chinese students' English ability has impacted their academic study and social life through telling, living, retelling, and reliving their language-using experience in the host country, employing narrative inquiry as the methodology. Though long overlooked, this line of research is important, as it can not only provide insights into the efficiency of their home country's EFL teaching but also shed light on how the educators in the host country can enhance the study abroad experience of international students. This article aims to unfurl what impacts three Chinese graduate students' English ability has exerted on their academic study and social life in the U.S., through making visible the complexity of their language-using experience utilizing narrative inquiry.

Narrative Inquiry

Grounded in the philosophical tradition of Dewey who believed that education, experience, and life are inextricably intertwined (Dewey, 1938), narrative inquiry contends that 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" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 415). Weaving experience, education, and life as an organic whole, narrative inquiry makes human experience meaningful both individually and socially.

Three participants — Xue, Hai, and Jin — were engaged in this narrative inquiry, all expressing their willingness to participate. Xue is a third-year male Ph.D. student in Biomedical Science whose age is 29. Hai is a second-year male Ph.D. student in Engineering who is 25. Jin, 23, is a first-year female master's student in Social Science. Before enrolling in American graduate school, all the participants received school instruction of English in China for over 10 years. Of the three participants, Jin is the only one proclaiming that she has always excelled in English among her Chinese peers. Xue and Hai both self-perceive their English-proficiency as average in China.

Collected through observations and interviews, field texts primarily included field notes, thick descriptions, interview transcripts, and personal communications, which were associated with each other and complemented each other in forming field texts and transforming field texts into research texts. The narrative tools drawn on in interpreting the stories mainly included broadening, burrowing, storying and restorying (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In establishing "credibility," central focus was placed on "not truth but truth-likeness or verisimilitude" (Bruner, 1985, p. 97), namely, "a compound of coherence and pragmatic utility" (Bruner, 1996, p. 90), through creating believable stories, convincing drama, and credible historical accounts.

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 section, in the form of narrative, tells the personal stories of the three 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.

Xue: Nodding does not mean understanding

Xue started recollecting his English-related experience from the first day of school in the U.S. when participating in the Orientation. Since then, he has begun to intensely realize how poor his listening comprehension in English is. In his 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 taken. According to Xue, the instructors usually appeared unaware of the language barrier non native-English-speaking students as him 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 with understanding oral English, but also expressing what he wanted to say. He was silent for most of the time in academic settings, which was corroborated by my observations. He seldom spoke; instead, he either quietly watched other students talking and debating, or looked to somewhere else blankly appearing absent-minded. When he did speak, he seemed to speak with a large difficulty, exhibiting great hesitancy, uncertainty, effort, and errors.

Xue 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, Dr. A, had been very displeased with his English ability. What I found very interesting was that, my first meeting with Dr. A, which was originally meant to gain his approval for conducting observations of Xue's performance of using English in his lab, became an outlet for his worries about Xue's English communicative competence, and an urgent request from his side for me to come and observe as possible as I can. He gave me an unexpectedly big welcome and almost treated me as a savior! Starting out complaining how poor Xue's English ability was, Dr. A said that when Xue first came to the lab and talked with 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. Dr. A expressed his strong wish for me to help Xue improve his English communicative competence so that his academic research will not be affected. He had me mark on my calendar all the times Xue was scheduled to give presentations in the next couple of months, saying that Xue may not tell me all, but he personally welcomed me to come and observe on any of the occasions. Obviously, Xue's English communicative competence had been the headache of his supervisor for a long time, and my request for observing his performance of using English happened to give his supervisor a piece of hope for having his communicative competence improved.

Though Xue perceived his poor communicative competence in English as the biggest hurdle to his academic achievement, when asked what constituted the greatest challenge in terms of the use of English in the U.S., surprisingly, his answer was the linguistic demand for everyday communication rather than for academic study. He was especially disappointed for not having developed more personal interactions and friendships with Americans because of the poor communicative competence in daily life.

Hai: I don't have much to tell you

As the narrative inquiry with Hai proceeded, I found that to Hai, telling of his experience, to a large extent, was like an outlet for his prolonged frustration, stress, and helplessness with regard to his English-using experience 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 invited him to share any language-using experience he went through in academic settings, he appeared very hesitant. After I made every attempt to prompt him, he finally said the following words,

Actually, I don't have much to tell you, because 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 possible causes, such as feeling uncomfortable disclosing his stories to others, not knowing where to start because of the multiple memories emerged simultaneously, etc. However, this response was really out of my expectation. I was speechless for a few seconds upon 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 want 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...

I then asked Hai to recall 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. It's not because I don't want to. To get more close to American people's life and make friends with them, I registered into the Friendship Program of the university when I first came. However, it was not long before I felt disheartened and dropped out. Restricted by my poor English communicative competence, I couldn't engage in any deep conversations with American people, but simply exchange of greetings and small talks. Therefore, my friends are all Chinese. 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.

As I engaged more deeply in the telling and living of Hai's stories, I managed to obtain a more wide-ranging picture of his English-related experience in the U.S.. In passing an English speaking test required of a non English-native-speaking student to be eligible for a teaching assistantship, he experienced an immense setback, which was "a sheer nightmare" as he described as follows,

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 don't want to recall this experience, because it's a sheer nightmare for me.

Hai was not only deficient in speaking ability, but also in listening ability. However, fortunately, according to Hai, listening ability 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.

Jin: I was not unprepared

Though self-perceiving her English proficiency among the top of the Chinese students, Jin's English skills were still insufficient in both academic study and social life, as the large difficulties she experienced unveiled. My observations of her performance of using English in class confirmed this finding. In class discussions, she seemed unable to participate effectively, and was quiet for most of the time, which formed a striking contrast with her vivacious and talkative personality.

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.

Despite the tremendous difficulty speaking spontaneously for academic purposes, the greatest challenge of using English in the U.S., as far as Jin felt, came from the social life beyond

academic study. 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, she would not get it, and simply appear as an outsider. 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. I can't engage in deep conversations with them, and can't develop any deep relationship with them either.

Stories Relived and Retold

Living and telling the stories of the participants within the inquiry field is not enough. This section intends to make meaning by retelling and reliving the stories. In narratively coding the field texts, four salient themes come to light, underpinning and shaping the transition from field texts to research texts, and stories lived and told to stories relived and retold. 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, and (d) implications for host countries.

Poor English Communicative Competence

The participants' insufficiency in English communicative competence is so striking, which stands out as the first prominent theme in reliving and retelling the stories. All participants demonstrated inadequate competency in expression and comprehension in English, though the degrees of the difficulty may vary. None of them was able to engage in the academic discourses actively, especially on highly fast-paced and interactive occasions, because of the poor English communicative competence. Their limited communicative competence not only obstructed their academic achievement, but also made their 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 needed to improve the most urgently.

The Impact of Poor English Communicative Competence on Academic Achievement

All participants were obviously quieter than their American peers, and were even silenced in academic settings. Previous literature has different points of view regarding the silence of Chinese students (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 native inquiry reveals distinctly that their silence in the communicative contexts is due not much to the differences in culture, educational philosophy, practices, or else, but linguistic difficulties, as Jin said, "Language is the biggest reason for me not to be active."

All participants are willing to participate in the academic activities, but due largely to the insufficient English communicative competence, their chances of participation are considerably reduced. The insufficient communicative competence not only contributes to their passivity, but also to their commitment of extra efforts which could have been used to bring about more academic achievements. More importantly, it results in their unsatisfactory demonstration of academic competence, and prevents them from displaying their full potential.

Though the participants' passivity and silence are not necessarily an indication of lack of knowledge or cognitive capacity, nor do they perceive themselves as less competent than their native English-speaking peers, their instructors may still take them as unqualified or unprepared to be legitimate contributors in the learning environment. 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.

If not for the poor communicative competence, 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 Jin would not have been considered as "unprepared" for her inactivity in class discussions. A conclusion can be safely drawn that their poor communicative competence has overshadowed a large volume of their behind-the-scenes work, and disadvantaged them to a great extent in academic settings, compared with their peers who are proficient in English.

The Impact of Poor English Communicative Competence on Social Life

An evident theme running through the participants' accounts of experience is the restriction of their interaction with Americans within the academic settings. They are more at ease with the use of English for academic purposes than for social interaction. Largely due to the limited communicative competence, their interactions with Americans are usually confined to the level of superficial greetings. They can hardly get involved into American people's life and make friends with them. None of the participants report developing friendship with Americans, but remain essentially unengaged with them apart from obligatory academic activities.

A collateral result is their distancing from the life of the American hosts and withdrawing to the Chinese community. Despite their expectations of engaging in an extensive intercultural experience in the U.S. and the awareness of the disadvantages of restricting themselves to the Chinese community, the limit of their communicative competence makes it very hard for them to establish a deeper and closer relationship with Americans. Hai and Jin even have the experience of consciously or subconsciously evading conversing with others using English.

The restriction of the participants' social life within the Chinese community is also out of an emotional need. Their social and emotional disconnection with the host people leads to their suffering of many negative feelings. Together with the stress and frustration from the academic study, they especially need their Chinese peers who can share their experience for socialization and emotional support. Through associating with their Chinese peers, they can relieve their frustration, find acknowledgment as good students as they have always been regarded as, and regain self-confidence, which, might have been lost in their frustrating English-using experience. All these factors can explain why their social network is mainly confined to the small sphere of the Chinese speech community. This finding also suggests that constrained by the poor English communicative competence, their 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.

Implications for Host Countries

This narrative inquiry reflects little recognition of the intense difficulties and frustrations non native-English-speaking students have experienced among the educators of the host country. While some faculty showed concern and dissatisfaction with the participants' English ability, most of the instructors simply appeared to be or chose to be unaware. The lack of support and accommodation to the participants' challenges not only from language but also its consequent aspects is very evident in the educational institutions in the host country.

In addition to the language support focusing on improving the participants' English communicative competence, fine-grained intervention should be offered to help the participants build up contacts with host students and people in the local community, and create more opportunities for multicultural networks. 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.

Though there is no denying that international students should take the initiative of overcoming their limited communicative competence, meeting the academic requirements, and assimilating 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 inquiry showed that all participants 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 educators in the host country can be more sensitive to the difficulties international students may undergo linguistically and socio-culturally, and more appreciative of their efforts and contributions, they would display greater willingness and ability to overcome the linguistic challenges and integrate into the host country's academic and social life.

Concluding Remarks

This narrative inquiry, through telling, living, retelling, and reliving the language-related experience of three Chinese graduate students in the U.S., illuminates how their inadequate command of English especially communicative competence has adversely affected their academic learning and non-academic aspects of life. Their insufficient English communicative competence constitutes a large obstacle to their active engagement in both academic setting and social life. Their shocking lack of English communicative competence, on the one hand, brings to the forefront the criticalness of enacting the Communicative Language Teaching approach in China's EFL classrooms; and on the other hand, provides important implications for the educational institutions in the host country in their endeavor to promote international students' study abroad experience. According to Bruner (1990), a good story should be open to different interpretations, letting different people fill in the gaps with their own experience and knowledge. It is my hope that this narrative inquiry will provide a new lens by which readers take away the meanings that become their own, and prompt ongoing further storying and restorying of experience in readers as well as me, the researcher.

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