



Yoke Sim FONG  
**LEARNERS IN  
TRANSITION**

*Chinese Students' Journeys from EFL to ESL and EIL*



# LEARNERS IN TRANSITION

As the number of Chinese students learning English increases worldwide, the need for teachers to understand the characteristics and challenges facing this group of learners grows. This is particularly true for those students moving from an English as a Foreign Language context to an English as a Second Language/International Language one, where they experience academic, linguistic and sociocultural transitions. Drawing on over twenty years of experience teaching English courses to Chinese learners, the author aims to highlight key findings to aid understanding, improve teachers' practice and offer pedagogical recommendations. Using students' voices, the book covers: how the traditional Chinese culture of learning plays a role; how new learning contexts provide opportunities and empowerment; how learners' beliefs and strategies are interconnected; how their motivation and identity underscore the power of real and imagined communities; and finally, that affect matters, showing how learners are propelled by the trajectory of their emotions. The book cites from the rich data collected over a five-year period to authenticate the findings and recommendations, but also to give voice to this group of learners to challenge the stereotype of the passive "Chinese learner". The essential insights contained within are useful for pre- and in-service teachers of English and researchers interested in language education around the world.

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# LEARNERS IN TRANSITION

Chinese Students' Journeys  
from EFL to ESL and EIL

*Yoke Sim FONG*

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# ABBREVIATIONS

BC	Bridging Course
CALP	Community of Academic Literacy Practice
CCA	Co-curricular activities
CELC	Centre for English Language Communication
CET4/6	College English Test Band 4/6
CHC	Confucian Heritage Cultures
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
EIL	English as an International Language
ELF	English as a Lingua Franca
ELT	English Language Teaching
ESL	English as a Second Language
FLACAS	Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale
FY	Foundation Year
FYP	Final Year Project
HE	Higher education
IEEE	Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
IP	Internship Programme
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
MOE	Ministry of Education
NCEE	National College Entrance Examination
NOS	New Oriental School
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NUS	National University of Singapore
OR	oral report

**xii** Abbreviations

PRC	People's Republic of China
QET	Qualifying English Test
SELF	Self English Learning Facility
SEP	Student Exchange Programme
SLANG	Sunderland's Language and News Group
SLEP	Secondary Level English Proficiency
SLL	Strategies in Language Learning
SM2	Senior Middle 2
SM3	Senior Middle 3
TCCL	The traditional Chinese culture of learning
TEIL	Teaching of English as an International Language
TOEFL	The Test of English as a Foreign Language
UDP	Undergraduate Degree Programme
UNNC	University of Nottingham Ningbo China
WE	World Englishes

# PROLOGUE

## Overview

This book sets out first to share the insights I have gained on the learner characteristics of Chinese students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and their transitions in moving from an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context at home to an English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as an International Language (EIL) study-abroad context. These insights are based on my

- experience of teaching these students from 1997 to the present and
- research undertaken since 1998 that cumulated in my PhD thesis, *Learners in transition: A longitudinal study of seven People's Republic of China students at the National University of Singapore* (Fong, 2014).

Second, I put forward some pedagogical implications; it is my sincere hope that this work will be a help to ELT colleagues teaching Chinese and other international students.

When I began to teach PRC students in the National University of Singapore (NUS), I realised that they were moving from an EFL context to an ESL, and arguably an EIL one. These PRC Chinese (henceforth PRC or Chinese) learners had to contend with academic, linguistic and sociocultural transitions. The NUS learning context was an English as a Second Language (ESL) one for these students as they were learning the language in a community where it was spoken (Cohen, 1998, p. 4). It was also an EIL context as NUS has, for many years, a large population of international students and faculty so that many varieties of English from different parts of the world may be in use in formal and informal settings. Student exchange, twinning and other collaborative programmes contribute further to the internationalisation of NUS. EIL is defined as “a function that English performs in multilingual, international contexts, particularly as a lingua franca that connects English users from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, both L1 and other

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users of English” (Matsuda, 2012, as cited in Matsuda & Matsuda, 2018, p. 66). As their English Language/ English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teacher in this new learning context, what should I know about the key common learner characteristics of this group of students and the transitions they undergo? How can I leverage these characteristics and transitions to support them in their English learning journey? These questions were very real for me as I taught an Intensive English course to successive cohorts of PRC students at NUS.

Interestingly, my research on the learner characteristics and transitions of the Chinese students became my own learning journey which cumulated in my PhD dissertation. My project was a multiple-case, longitudinal study of seven focal participants who first enrolled in a bridging course in NUS and then matriculated in its undergraduate degree programmes. The key findings of my doctorate studies indicate that

- The traditional Chinese culture of learning (henceforth TCCL) is foundational but not all-encompassing
- The ESL and EIL learning context in NUS provides the learners with opportunities and empowerment
- Beliefs and strategies are interconnected; enlarging the vision also fuels the action
- Their motivation and identity underscore the power of real and imagined communities
- Affect matters; the learners are propelled by the trajectory of their emotions.

Together, these five key findings provide the big picture, a balanced perspective of the Chinese learners, and form the themes of the five main chapters of this book. To support the findings and pedagogical recommendations, I will cite from the rich data collected over nearly five years. (I have elected to cite from the data verbatim, unless meaning needs to be clarified, to give readers an authentic feel of the learners’ reflections and responses. Their expression is mostly clear and fluent despite occasional typos and minor slips in syntax or spelling.) Through my book, I hope to give voice to this group of learners who can be very active students with unique personalities and learning trajectories, as compared to the stereotype of the passive “Chinese learner” in the literature.

### **My journey of teaching and researching PRC learners**

In teaching my first NUS Intensive English course (commonly known as the Bridging Course and henceforth BC), I came to appreciate the struggles and aspirations of these young people as learners of English who had to adapt quickly to a new academic and sociocultural context. They had to raise their English proficiency during the BC before university matriculation to cope with the demands of academic work as well as day-to-day living in a study-abroad context.

In my early contact with these students, I observed certain characteristics in their beliefs and learning behaviour, as well as changes in these beliefs and behaviour

over the duration of the BC. For example, many of the students initially asked for a way to improve their proficiency, especially their vocabulary, *quickly*. It was as if they equated proficiency with vocabulary enhancement and there was a formula to achieve that enhancement speedily. However, I also noticed that some students gradually modified or replaced their initial beliefs and strategies.

It may be necessary at this juncture to provide some background to these Chinese students and my interaction with them. Since 1992, succeeding cohorts of PRC students have received undergraduate scholarships from the Ministry of Education (MOE) of Singapore to study at Singapore universities. The scholarship scheme was established as a result of growing diplomatic ties between Singapore and China in the 1990s (Lee, 2007). At NUS, pre-sessional language support has been provided to these learners by the Centre for English Language Communication (CELC), where I have been teaching since 1997, through the BC that aims to help these students reach approximately a proficiency level equivalent to Ordinary Level of the Singapore–Cambridge General Certificate of Education Examination. This examination, commonly referred to as the “O” level, is taken annually by most Singapore secondary school leavers. Essentially, the BC has an ELT focus with EAP elements in the programme. There have been two different bridging courses for these scholars: SM2 for those who have completed Senior Middle (Year) 2 in China, and SM3 for those who have completed Senior Middle (Year) 3. The SM3 students have also passed the National College Entrance Examination in China (NCEE), popularly known as the *Gaokao*. The Intensive English course for SM3 students ceased to be offered in 2012, while the SM2 Course is still in place.

Returning to the main narrative of my teaching and researching the Chinese students as learners of English, I feel a sense of appreciation. Since 1997, I have taught nine groups of these students in the BC at NUS (besides other Chinese learners enrolled in CELC’s undergraduate and postgraduate courses). During these two decades, the rapport built with each group led to first, a good teacher–student relationship, and later to warm, enduring friendships. Some students from each batch have kept in touch through cards, telephone, email, text, Facebook, and increasingly Whatsapp or WeChat messages. Some have dropped in at my office. The latest visit last year, a surprise, was from Qi who came to share good news. He had become a father and a Singapore citizen; he had also started his own businesses.

What is significant about the close relationship I have enjoyed with these Chinese students for my teaching and research? I suggest the following. First, it underscores my long-standing, first-hand, privileged–insider knowledge of these learners as a teacher and a researcher. Second, the students’ trust in me as their teacher allowed the participants of my doctorate study to be open and candid in their diary entries, interview responses and the autobiography. Third, having followed the successful journeys of the forerunners from the earlier batches, I aspire to tell their stories to help future cohorts succeed in their transitions from an EFL to an ESL/EIL context.

To provide readers with some insights into the overall learning journeys of the succeeding batches of PRC students, I invited some former students to write a short narrative on some highlights about the transitions in their English learning from the



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time they came to Singapore, during their BC, and up till their graduation from their Undergraduate Degree Programme (UDP). I also expressed interest in knowing what they were doing with English in their professional life and what they saw as the place or role of English in their future. Several of them responded and these snapshots can be found in Appendix A, “Former PRC SM students: some snapshots”.

During these two decades of teaching the Chinese students and getting acquainted with them, I started researching their learning experiences from 1998, leading to several journal and conference papers. These studies built up my knowledge of the Chinese students’ learner characteristics and the transitions they experienced, and eventually led me to undertake a doctoral research project. By learner characteristics, I refer to the students’ attributes, conceptualisations and actions, specifically, motivation, beliefs, learning strategies, affective dimension and social identities (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). In the rest of this introduction, I will describe some highlights from the journal and conference papers to provide the background to my teaching of and research on PRC learners.

My first effort to support these young Chinese learners in their transition from their home context to NUS one was to encourage them to be conscious about their own learning. I engaged in a joint project with a CELC colleague to experiment with the learner diary as an instrument to raise the metacognitive awareness of our two groups of 1998 BC students (about 40 in total). The diary was found to be a useful tool to help the learners reflect on their learning journey, and to develop and evaluate knowledge relating to their own person, strategies and tasks. The participants evaluated their strengths and weaknesses, made plans for further learning, chose strategies, and negotiated task demands. This study was presented as a joint paper at AILA 1999 and later published as a book chapter, “Learner diaries as a tool to heighten Chinese students’ metacognitive awareness of English learning” (Young & Fong, 2003). A replication of this study with the next batch of BC students, presented at AILA 2002, confirmed the previous study’s findings. From these two early studies, I learnt that the diary was a useful instrument for longitudinal inquiry and for raising students’ metacognition towards their own learning.

To obtain a general profile of the Chinese students’ attitudes and actions in managing their learning, I conducted a questionnaire survey on 151 students enrolled in the 2005 BC cohort. The results indicated that, five months into the BC, the students were generally confident about learning English well and about speaking English in public. They believed in effort for achievement, self-monitoring for improvement as well as self-directed and independent learning, especially with experimentation outside of class. However, the results also showed a lack of confidence in their own language learning aptitude and in specific knowledge on learning strategies. There was little inclination to being actively involved in the evaluation and direction of their formal in-class learning, such as its objectives, activities, pace and assessments. For language learning strategies, these students preferred the use of social and affective learning strategies. Overall, the study pointed to the need for pedagogical intervention to help PRC learners build on their confidence and their belief in self-effort on the one hand, and to enhance their knowledge of strategies

and their in-class responsibility on the other. This study, published as “Through a looking glass: A profile of SM3 students enrolled in an intensive English course” (Fong, 2006a), enhanced my understanding of Chinese learners’ attitudes, actions and their learner characteristics and transitions from an EFL to an ESL/EIL context.

To follow up on the above quantitative study of the 2005 BC cohort, I conducted a qualitative study using a summative or exit diary entry on a smaller number of the same cohort towards the end of the course. Seventeen of the small group of BC students I taught for that batch responded to my invitation to reflect on their English language learning experience. The analysis of the data, which comprised responses to any of a set of ten prompts, focused on the learners’ motivation, beliefs, attitudes, strategies and affective factors. The data indicated that the students’ motivation was mainly instrumental, they had clear beliefs about language learning and they also evaluated their progress regularly. Some language learning strategy use was mentioned, although few of the students reported deliberate use. Affective factors were shown to have a strong impact on the students’ experience, with a range of positive and negative emotions associated with their English learning. Two other recurring themes were the importance of peer support and the emphasis on effort. First, the students stressed their bonding with their group members, being far away from family and friends. Second, they also reiterated the importance of effort on their part to succeed in their learning of English. Generally, this group of students preferred the teaching and learning methods for English in the BC to those in their high school in China; they thought that the Intensive English course was helpful on the whole. The teacher’s role remained an important one for these students, as also documented in the literature on the Chinese learners (Fusheng & Rao, 2007; Liang, 2009). The methodology, skills and personality of the teacher all had an impact on the learning outcomes of these students.

The above study yielded useful insights on the PRC learners for me as a teacher. For interested readers, they can find a report on this study in the journal article, “‘Don’t worry a lot, dear!’: Reflections of PRC ESL learners on their English language learning experience” (Fong, 2006b). Very importantly for me also as a researcher, this qualitative study prefigured the learner characteristics and transitions I would focus on in my further research. The limitation of the diary also became apparent, however, as I could not probe issues surfaced by the analysis of the data. This led me to reflect on using interviews for triangulation.

After I embarked on doctoral studies on the broad topic of Chinese learners with the University of Nottingham, United Kingdom (on a part-time basis with an annual residency requirement), I visited the University of Nottingham campus at Ningbo, China (UNNC) three times between 2005 and 2006 to get acquainted with the Foundation Year (FY) students and to collect data. The first visit resulted in a pilot project: an informal interview with a small number of 2005 FY students to get a general feel of their English learning experiences. The data obtained were then compared with those from the summative diary study of their NUS 2005 BC counterparts. This comparison was possible as both the diary and the interview were conducted using the same set of ten prompts. The findings showed many similarities

but also differences between the two groups in terms of motivation, perceptions, self-monitoring, strategy use, as well as affective and social factors. Instrumental motivation was strong for both groups, but the UNNC students also expressed some degree of integrative motivation. In terms of their perception of their language aptitude, the NUS students seemed less confident than their UNNC counterparts. Both groups, however, evaluated and monitored their own progress in the various language skills. Generally, they preferred the teaching and learning methods for English at university than in their high school and thought that their respective courses, BC and FY, were helpful. The teacher's role remained an important one for both groups; they commented quite extensively on the approach, professionalism and personality of their teachers. However, there were also signs that the students were moving away from dependence on teachers towards greater independence for their own learning. Language learning strategies were mentioned by both samples. Both groups also expressed a variety of emotions associated with learning English. However, the NUS group seemed to have experienced a wider range between positive and negative emotions while the UNNC group was mainly positive in the affective dimension. Written up as "A tale of two cities: A comparative study of (two groups of) PRC ESL learners," the study was presented during the second CELC Symposium in 2007.

After the pilot project, I collected data for my doctoral research from the group of PRC students I taught in the 2006 BC cohort during three periods over the five years they spent in NUS: their BC, their freshman year in 2006 and around their graduation. The data were then analysed and written up as my PhD thesis.

At this point, there may be questions as to the relevance of the data for current day PRC students, as Chinese society, especially as found in the megacities of the eastern seaboard, is known to be fast evolving. After a lull of several years while I worked on my thesis, I took again to teaching the BC in 2015 and 2016. I was gratified that this allowed me to journey again alongside these young students in their English learning. To investigate how similar or different these later cohorts of PRC students were to their "seniors" whom I had taught and studied in earlier years, I requested them to write a short paragraph on their English-learning experiences. Among those who gave me permission to use their writing for my research was Li (pseudonym). I reproduce her snapshot of her journey below and invite the reader to reflect on the learner characteristics and transitions as depicted in the paragraph.

I was born in a common Chinese family, and I was a native Chinese speaker. I did not get known about English until I entered my primary school. Out of the requirements from school, I started to learn English at year 3. The English teacher in school was not so professional that I took extra English classes after school. Fortunately, I met a quite kind teacher who taught us in an interesting way, which made the whole class full of joy and enjoy learning English. I still remember her now even about eight years have past since then. Then I went for my junior high school. At that time, we had a special English class every week, which would be taught by a foreigner, who was from Canada. Although we were not good at English or even struggled to

understand, we felt fun to take his class as the class were more open and lively than our common classes. The most struggling time to learn English was in my high school, as I had to prepare for my College Entrance Examination. Actually I doubted the real reason why we should study English. I thought we should treat English as a tool to communicate rather than examination or grades, which just degraded the true value of English and made people fear and bored to learn English. However, I kept learning English following the instructions of my teacher, who just taught us the written English. This is why I was poor at my spoken English as I had few opportunities to speak it. Today I am glad that I can come to Singapore. Living in an English environment makes me improve spoken English a lot. However, it is still hard for me to listen clearly from all kinds of accents. In the future, I will still focus on my reading, writing, listening and last but not least speaking.

In her narrative, Li described her language learning experience as influenced by her English language teachers, their personalities and methods, her cognitive and affective responses and her motivations. The traditional Chinese culture of learning is reflected through her struggles with and efforts/strategies for the National College Entrance Examination. On the other hand, her critique of and doubts about studying English for examinations indicate her beliefs and identity. She also evaluated her competence in her English skills and the attendant reasons as well as her new, ESL context in Singapore (favourably). Finally, she plans for her ongoing journey. In this snapshot, I discern that Li displayed nearly all the learner characteristics of the earlier cohorts of PRC students and the transitions they experienced.

Thus, I am confident that the findings of my study are still valid and useful for ELT colleagues who are concerned with supporting PRC students in their English learning journeys. To disseminate the research findings of the above project, I presented the following at international conferences which were well-received, generating lively interest and questions among the audiences.

- *Learners in Transition: Chinese students enrolled in English bridging courses.* Paper presented at Shantou University, Shantou, Guangdong, PR China (2010).
- *Learners in Transition: Seven People's Republic of China students at the National University of Singapore.* Paper presented at Shantou University, Shantou, Guangdong, PR China (2014).
- *The Intercultural Transitions of Seven PRC Students in Singapore.* Paper presented at National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan (2015).
- *Faces of Motivation: A Multi-faceted Perspective of Seven PRC Learners.* Paper presented at The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong (2015).
- *TCCL: The Perspective from a Longitudinal Study of Seven PRC Students.* Paper presented at the fifth CELC Symposium, National University of Singapore (2016).
- *PRC Learners in Study-abroad Contexts: What Teachers Need to Know.* Paper presented at The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand (2016).

- *Learners in Transition: A Case Study of Chinese Students at National University of Singapore*. Paper presented at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, PRC (2016).

## A summary of methodology

### *Instruments, focus and research questions*

My studies and gleanings from literature on methodology confirmed the instruments I would use for triangulation in my doctoral research: learner diaries, face-to-face and email interviews, and an autobiography. In addition, as I grew in familiarity with the literature on Chinese students, I also grew in confidence regarding the learner characteristics I would focus on. Thus, I wove certain a priori categories or themes into the prompts of the diaries and interviews for my inquiry: motivation, beliefs, strategies, affective factors, identity, culture and context (see Appendix B for the prompts used in the instruments). I was, however, open to the possibility of other themes surfacing from the data analysis. Finally, revisiting my earlier studies, I realised that I had favoured the qualitative approach; thus, this was the path I chose for my longitudinal research project.

The data collection began as planned in 2006; the learner diary and face-to-face interviews were carried out in both NUS and UNNC. Together, they formed *Stage 1* of data collection for the research project. The original research questions aimed to compare the learning experiences of these two groups of PRC learners as a result of undergoing their respective BC and FY and to draw pedagogical implications from the findings. A preliminary analysis of the learner diaries and interviews suggested that there were similarities and also differences between the motivations, beliefs, strategies, affective factors and other aspects with regard to the two groups. There were also indications that the Chinese culture of learning and the learning/teaching contexts impacted the respective students' learning journeys.

For *Stage 2* of the data collection, an exit or summative interview and an autobiography near the students' graduation in 2010 were planned to give "closure" to data collection. This longitudinal perspective, as well as the wide to narrow, and group to individual approach, I believe, is a defining characteristic of the thesis and gives it depth and originality.

However, I had to make a transition myself when only seven of the original NUS sample responded to the email interview, despite two rounds of email sent to invite participation, from both the NUS and the UNNC samples. It was probable that most of the participants were adjusting to new schedules and lifestyles around the time of graduation and hence did not respond to the invitations. My dilemma at that point was whether to "zoom in" on a complete set of data from a smaller number of focal participants (Duff, 2008, pp. 121, 122) or to continue with the "incomplete" data from a larger sample. Reading and rereading the seven email replies, I reflected that focusing on these seven respondents would probably yield more substantial findings. It would also do greater justice to the richness of

the whole set of data contributed by each individual. Thus, I decided to make the significant change to examine in depth the data from the seven learners as a multiple-case study. I was also encouraged by Norton's (2000) study of five focal participants following a multi-stage and multi-method selection strategy. Although constituting a very small sample, her case studies provided a very meaningful representation of migrant women learners of English in Canadian society.

There was one more step to the data collection; to complete the broad to narrow focus, I needed to identify at least one of the seven focal participants to write an autobiographical account of his learning journey. The task was expedited when one learner, Tang (pseudonym), took pains to reply to my follow-up questions on his responses to the email interview. Moreover, he voluntarily wrote a third time to further explain and substantiate his responses. Because of the richness of his data and the enthusiasm he showed, he became my natural choice. I moved quickly in an "opportunistic" sampling decision by inviting Tang to write the account. He accepted the invitation and emailed the narrative within a few days (see Appendix C).

Following the decision to focus on the seven respondents of the email interview, I adjusted the research questions of my project to the following:

- 1 What are some key learner characteristics of PRC students and what transitions, if any, do they make in their English learning as a result of studying in NUS?
- 2 What pedagogical implications can I draw from the findings?

### ***Focal participants***

The data for my longitudinal study, collected over nearly five years, were provided by seven focal participants. Who were these seven young Chinese learners? Table 0.1 presents an overview of the students (identified by pseudonyms).

However, these students were not mere facts and figures. Beyond the commonalities that they started learning English in late childhood or early adolescence, were recruited from some of China's best universities, excelled in the *Gaokao* and joined NUS at the average age of 19, they had varied personal, social and regional

**TABLE 0.1** Focal participants of multiple-case study

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Major for UDP</i>	<i>Occupation After Graduation</i>
1 Chu	Female	Biology	PhD student, NUS
2 Ping	Male	Computational Biology	Research Assistant, NUS
3 Qi	Male	Environmental Engineering	Research Assistant, NUS
4 Shen	Male	Quantitative Finance	PhD student, Johns Hopkins U.
5 Sun	Female	Quantitative Finance	Officer in a technology firm
6 Tang	Male	Physics	Research Assistant, NTU
7 Wei	Male	Physics	PhD student, NUS

backgrounds. To provide a fuller picture of the study's participants as unique individuals, I include in the sketches below some biodata they voluntarily disclosed and some impressions I formed from my interactions with them.

**Chu**, coming from a large city in Hubei province in Central China, had her eye on the world. She aspired to be a research scientist in an Anglophone country. To attain that goal, she had been studying English from primary school onwards and also attended the New Oriental School (NOS), a famous private language school. Her parents held intellectually demanding jobs and provided Chu with computers, software, MP3 players, tapes and books. Besides using the diverse resources, she was also a determined strategist who experimented with different techniques to expedite learning. Among her classmates, Chu shone as being possibly the most articulate and exuberant.

**Ping** seemed almost always placid, as his name signifies, and preferred to take life "naturally" (in his own words) as it comes. His reflections on his English journey indicated a thoughtful and sensitive approach to life. The only son of loving parents and grandson of a doting grandfather, he mentioned sailing trips and other details which suggested a comfortable home, situated in a large city in Zhejiang province on China's affluent eastern seaboard. His other hobbies included following online bird forums and computer games. Although a person of few words, he was pleasant and much liked by his SM3 group.

**Qi** hailed from a rural community near a small city in Shaanxi province in the western part of China. In his learner diary, Qi documented his memories of his childhood extensively. It was fascinating to learn that his immediate family lived in a cave dwelling in the same ancestral farmland as the house for the extended family. He was the most unique character among the focal participants not only for his background, but also for his pronounced Chinese cultural identity. Initially, he wrote Chinese poetry and resisted learning more English than necessary. Happily, the latter changed towards the end of the UDP.

**Shen** came from the same city and university as Ping, and they were both easy-going characters. However, Shen seemed more visionary, envisaging a future where English would be imperative for advancement. He thus prepared himself by earnestly studying English from secondary school onwards, as well as enrolling for tuition at NOS. All this was made possible with strong moral and financial home support. He could be considered the most successful student in his BC group, being exempted from the freshman EAP course upon matriculation.

**Sun** was the other female student among the focal participants. In contrast to Chu, she conformed more to the image of the reticent Chinese learner in class. She seemed to enjoy the BC in her gentle way, however. Yet, the data revealed that she was no conformist as she critiqued the exam-driven system in China, and the curriculum and pedagogy of the BC. Of her early life, Sun mentioned her home in the province of Shandong in North China and documented her diligent, even rigorous, preparation for the *Gaokao* and her feelings surrounding that period.

**Tang** began his autobiography by telling us that he "was born in a medium size town in central south China," which I gathered to be in Hunan province. His parents, well-educated judging from their professions, advocated a good beginning to learning English and provided for tuition classes. I had the impression that Tang

was diffident during the BC, an impression close to the “passive learner” portrayed in the literature. Yet, in the data, especially in Stage 2, he was far from the stereotype. He was not only a learner and user of English, but also a thinker who reflected deeply on his own and others’ learning.

**Wei** hailed from a large industrialised city of north China’s Hebei province. Besides his parents, he mentioned an older brother. I had the impression that his scholarship meant much to the family, which might account partly for his strong ambition. He also revealed his parents’ preference of Singapore over America for his PhD studies. Wei struck me as being a high achiever and thus his direct entry to an NUS doctoral programme was no surprise. What surprised me was how much he integrated with the community during his Student Exchange Programme (SEP) in the United States despite his independent personality.

### Data analysis

Having introduced the focal participants, I will proceed to describe the analysis process which is represented graphically in Figure 0.1.

To generate a set of initial labels from which categories could be later derived, I engaged with the data as soon as it was feasible (Richards, 2003) by coding the learner diaries, face-to-face and email interviews, and autobiography. I wrote the codes and also notes on what I found to be significant in the margins of the diary entries and the transcripts of the face-to-face interviews. In addition, I made summaries for the most salient points and themes, an approach suggested by Duff (2008), in the diaries and face-to-face interviews. As the email interview responses were usually short, I did not write summaries for them, nor for the sole autobiography.

One of the best known approaches to analysis in qualitative research is offered by *grounded theory* which originated with Glaser and Strauss (1967). This early work was later extended by that of Strauss and Corbin (1998) who pioneered three separate types/processes of coding to facilitate inquiry and interpretation: open, axial and selective. One of the key concepts of *grounded theory* is *theoretical sampling* which links together coding, analysis and data collection. It is “the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses

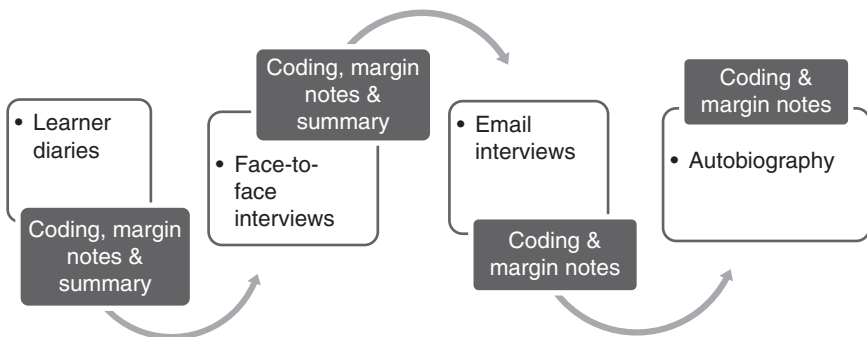


FIGURE 0.1 Data analysis process



his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45). Moreover, the categories and overall scheme emerge as “researchers develop their coding categories through a process of constant comparison” (Alaszewski, 2006, p. 86).

My research, although it had elements advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1998), was not based entirely on *grounded theory*. While I jointly collected, coded and analysed my data and decided what data to collect next and where to find them, I also had a priori categories of learner characteristics in mind: motivation, beliefs, strategies, affective factors, identity, culture and context. These categories were culled from the literature, my experience of teaching PRC students, and the findings of my previous studies. However, as I read and re-read the data, I was also looking out for unforeseen themes. One such unexpected sub-theme gleaned from the diaries, for example, was demotivation due to the monotony of studying only English for nearly six months during the BC and the lack of a push factor like a major exam. Thus, as expressed by Duff (2008), “[a]lthough qualitative data analysis is typically inductive and data driven, the codes may also be anticipated before analyzing the data (a priori codes) given the topic of the studies, the research questions, and the issues likely to be encountered” (p. 160). This was indeed the case with my project which adopted an eclectic approach to the analysis of the data.

After experimenting with some software for analysing, coding and synthesising the data, I had to agree with Alaszewski (2006) that while such technology facilitates the process of managing and analysing qualitative data, “they require a substantial investment of time to master and use effectively and do not remove the need for researchers to use their judgement when identifying themes” (p. 97). I decided that I was more comfortable with analysing the data manually as I had by then developed familiarity and closeness to the data through repeated reading, reflection, coding, summary and note-making. I carried out my analysis through “repeated perusal of the data” (Alaszewski, 2006, p. 267), an approach that Gieve and Clark (2005) had also used in their study. The initial coding and notes were also refined over time and, as the analysis progressed, I was building a clearer picture of my students’ learner characteristics and transitions.

I strived to be consistent and applied the same process to all four groups of data. A typical scenario of the process is as follows. As I was interested to study the participants’ learner characteristics and the transitions they made in their new context, I examined, line by line, the diaries, face-to-face interviews, email interviews, and autobiography, to look out for instances which exemplified the a priori themes of culture and learning contexts, as well as motivation, beliefs, strategies, affect, identity, investment and transitions. When I saw what I considered to be instances of these categories, I underlined/highlighted and coded them, and made notes in the margins. For example, I identified a remark in Qi’s face-to-face interview transcript that I perceived as relating to the TCCL: “High school we just uh learn English to pass exams.” So I highlighted the remark and coded it as “TCCL” in the margin; I also noted “Exam”. For a later response in the interview, “I always think

language is just a culture so the difference or similarities is just in the culture,” I considered it as demonstrating belief on language and culture. Thus, I highlighted and coded it as “Belief” and noted “Culture and language” in the margin. These codes and notes were revisited at least once for all the participants’ data for me to confirm them. They were also refined or changed where necessary during the second or third look.

### ***Themes, sub-themes and data samples***

The consolidation of the analysis of the four sources of data yielded seven main categories or themes. In turn, each of these seven themes could be divided into several sub-themes. To present the themes and sub-themes more clearly, I represent them in Table 0.2, together with verbatim data samples for illustration. These categories/sub-categories are both a priori ones as well as “unforeseen” ones that surfaced during the analysis. The data samples may at times overlap as a participant may touch on two or more themes/sub-themes in the same utterance, and it was not always possible to separate the parts from the whole without affecting the sense. For example, the following excerpt from Chu’s diary contains a reference to the notion of “deaf English” in TCCL,<sup>1</sup> the emphasis on grammar in TCCL,<sup>2</sup> as well as the resultant affect.<sup>3</sup>

It seems to me that the root of our Chinese students always learning “deaf English”<sup>1</sup> is that we put too much emphasize on the grammar.<sup>2</sup> Whenever we are speaking, we are thinking about the grammar<sup>2</sup> which definitely slows the speed.<sup>3</sup> A more serious consequence is the losing of confidence.<sup>3</sup>

(Chu\_D)

The above quotation is identified by the focal participant’s pseudonym and the source of the data, in this case, the diary represented by the letter “D”. This method of identification (in parentheses) will be applied to all the quotations from the diaries. Data from the face-to-face interviews will be denoted by the participant’s pseudonym and “F” while those from responses to the email interview will be labelled with the pseudonym and “E”. Quotations from Tang’s autobiography will be indicated by “Tang\_A”. This method of identification will be applied to all the quotations used in this book from this point onwards to provide a quick view of the sources of the data.

In the rest of this book, I hope to present the stories of the seven focal participants’ English learning journeys and their transitions. Before that, we will survey the research literature on Chinese students. Proceeding from this backdrop, I will discuss my research findings before recommending approaches for teaching and supporting these learners. Finally, I will conclude with an epilogue on limitations, future directions, EIL/ELF and present snapshots of the continuing journeys of some of the focal participants.

**TABLE 0.2** Themes, sub-themes and data samples

<i>The Seven Themes</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>	<i>Data Samples</i>
TCCL	Limited practice	“. . . we have few chance to speak” (Wei_F)
	Transmission model of learning/teaching	“The tutor just tell you how to do this question . . .” (Qi_F).
	Imitation model of learning/	“. . . my English teacher asked us to recite every article from textbook . . .” (Tang_D).
	Exam-driven learning/teaching	“. . . English education in China is . . . aimed for exams” (Tang_F).
	Teacher as authority	“It’s only when teachers ask you to answer questions, you will speak in English. Except that you don’t have chance to speak” (Chu_F).
	Mastery of knowledge	“. . . we were supposed . . . to memorize everything the teacher assigned” (Ping_D).
	Emphasis on texts	“She [his teacher] asked us to transcribe the text we had learned as homework” (Qi_D).
	Emphasis on grammar/vocabulary	“. . . our emphasise just in learning new words, grammars . . .” (Wei_F).
	Belief in effort for achievement	“Reciting contributed greatly to my progress” (Tang_D).
	Passivity/Activity	“At that time, we are forced to learn from morning until night . . . We have no choice . . .” (Sun_D). “. . . after I came to Singapore . . . I managed . . . by communicating with people in English” (Sun_D).
NUS learning context	BC Curriculum	“I think the course helps most is the spoken English and the activities. It is very interesting . . . It’s quite useful . . . to write essays, so although I spent a lot of time on it . . . it’s worth it” (Qi_F).
	BC Community	“I am now in a country whose formal language is English . . . almost anything written down is in English . . . pay attention . . . you will learn more and live better” (Sun_D).
	UDP Curriculum	“I now listen in English, read in English, write in English. Except not speak in English” (Shen_F).
	UDP SEP and IP	“With all native speakers around, I was forced to speak English more frequently and to be influenced by their accents and tones” (Chu_E).

<i>The Seven Themes</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>	<i>Data Samples</i>
Motivation/L2 selves	UDP FYP	“My [FYP] supervisor is German and I have to communicate with him in English . . . . I said a lot and My English has improved naturally” (Wei_E).
	UDP Community	“. . . in hall . . . because the majority are locals and yup, you just have to speak English” (Chu_F).
	Significant people	“. . . my mother decided to do something to help me . . . . After hearing my mother’s plan, I was very eager to improve my English” (Shen_D).
	Instrumental-Integrative	“I spent majority of my effort in research projects . . . one French girl . . . also an exchange student . . . integrated herself well with local people. By the end of exchange program, she spoke very good English” (Tang_E).
	Motivated self	Ought-to Self: “‘Ping, you should put more attention on your essays.’ Yes, I should” (Ping_D).
Beliefs	Loss of motivation	“Sometimes I feel very bored to learn English . . . I feel my brain is getting dull” (Wei_D).
	Effort	“I think I can get a good grade if I study hard enough” (Sun_F).
	Vocabulary	“I always have a notion that vocabulary is a must” (Chu_F).
	Grammar	“I had got the viewpoint that grammar is not vital for English learning” (Qi_D).
	Language, communication and language learning Context	“Because English is a language, you have to use it. You cannot communicate with a computer” (Ping_F).
Strategies		“Perhaps, it is partly because Singapore is not totally a English speaking country . . . my progress is very slow” (Tang_D).
	Natural approach	“Learning is accumulated everyday with everyone” (Ping_E).
	Deliberate approach	“Oral presentation is the most challenging . . . I need to spend a lot of time thinking out a suitable topic, organize it and present it” (Sun_E).
	Combination of both	“[Learning] journeys . . . are good. We have more chance to communicate . . . I often go to the CELC to read the books. I can choose what I like . . .” (Wei_F).

(Continued)

TABLE 0.2 (Continued)

<i>The Seven Themes</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>	<i>Data Samples</i>
Affective domain	Happiness	“During the past five years, I have improved a lot in English . . . I feel very happy and satisfied” (Chu_E).
	Fear/unease	“Now I feel a little disappointed and perplexed . . . I just don’t know what I’ve learnt today” (Wei_D).
	Confidence	“The most important thing was that I began to build my confidence in English from that time” (Shen_D).
	Shame	“I had been receiving English education for three years . . . yet my speeches were still frequently interrupted by ‘Pardon?’ . . . Needless to say, I felt terribly ashamed” (Tang_A).
Identity, agency and investment	Identity	“As a lucky scholar, I am not care about exams, university and money” (Ping_D).
	Agency and investment	“I would like to decide what to learn and how to learn” (Sun_F).
	Empowerment	“My internship . . . requires me to communicate with various vendors and contractors . . . After some time, I felt comfortable to . . . communicate with them freely” (Qi_E).

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# 1

## TCCL AND THE CHINESE STUDENT IN THE LITERATURE

### 1.1 “The Chinese learner” and the “traditional Chinese culture of learning”: affirmation, dissent and winds of change

The two interrelated notions of the Chinese learner and the traditional Chinese culture of learning (TCCL) are contested grounds. On the one hand, there are studies which argue that these are fairly homogenous, identifiable entities. On the other, there is research that seeks to debunk these concepts. To complicate the picture, there is also research that say, yes, these two entities exist but they are changing along with China’s rapid economic, social and cultural development in recent decades. Let us review these three strands in turn.

#### 1.1.1 *Affirmation*

The debate might have started and become pronounced in the 1990s when the term “a Chinese culture of learning” was used by Cortazzi and Jin (1996, p. 170) to refer to

taken-for-granted frameworks of expectations, attitudes, beliefs, values and beliefs about what constitutes good learning, about how to teach or learn, whether and how to ask questions, what textbooks are for, and how language teaching relates to broader issues of the nature and purpose of education. It is part of a hidden curriculum that encompasses the broader issues of the nature and purpose of education.

(p. 169)

Children are socialised early into this culture of learning, and the influence continues into secondary school and even into university (p. 169). However, Cortazzi and Jin

qualify that, given that China is a huge, populous country undergoing rapid changes, there will be variations and they do not expect all Chinese students or teachers to be the same. In a later work, we learn that this “highly influential Chinese culture of learning a language” emphasises a mastery of knowledge (including knowledge of skills) primarily from two sources, the teacher and the textbook (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998). Learning is achieved through “dedication and hard work, through close attention to texts and memorisation of vocabulary” (p. 102). This transmission model of learning has its roots in the teachings of the Chinese sage and philosopher, Confucius.

It may be necessary here to give a very brief sketch of Confucian thought and its paramount influence on Chinese culture. Confucius (551–479 BC) lived during the *Spring and Autumn* and *Warring States* periods (770–221 BC), which was an unprecedented era of cultural flowering amidst conflict and civil strife in the history of China. As the “First Teacher of China” (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006), Confucius brought education to a large number of people and was rightly regarded as having contributed significantly to Chinese cultural history. His school of thought became known as Confucianism and his teachings were enshrined in the *Five Classics* and *Four Books* (Li & Chang, 2001, p. 2). These served as the “core textbook” for the civil service examinations during succeeding Chinese dynasties. Their influence even extended beyond imperial China to play a dominant role in the intellectual life of Korea, Japan and Vietnam (often termed the Confucian Heritage Cultures or CHC). Thus, CHC learners are socialised early to the idea of having a core textbook that they must study and know by heart.

Confucian philosophy, and hence the resultant Chinese culture, emphasises right relationships between monarch and subject, father and son, husband and wife. The former in each pair has absolute authority over the latter. This hierarchical conception of relationships has inevitably impacted the teacher–student relationship. The Chinese learner in the TCCL would never dream of challenging the teacher’s authority. They have been schooled in a teacher-centred curriculum and a highly structured classroom culture.

Moreover, Confucian thought also stresses the core concept of “Rites, Intelligence, Righteousness, Trust and Benevolence” (Ni, 2008), which are the ideal qualities of a Confucian scholar. Their adherence to this core concept may explain why Chinese learners steeped in the TCCL may appear to be “passive” in class; they may be concerned that being too active would cause them to be seen as showing off, thus marring the harmony of the class.

Lest Confucianism is seen as having a negative impact on the ELT classroom, Ni (2008) adds that it embodies some very enlightening concepts. The ideal Confucian scholar in ancient times aspired to becoming a well-rounded gentleman by taking up the Six Arts: Rites, Music, Archery, Horsemanship, Calligraphy and Mathematics. He also had to broaden his experience through his travels. In addition, Confucius promoted critical thinking in academic learning and advocated teaching to meet the different needs of students in order to achieve an educational awareness of their physical and emotional needs.

As a result of this culture of learning based on the Confucian tradition, Chinese learners may appear to Western teachers as “weak” at oral communication. They



also seem “shy” and “passive”. However, the students see themselves as “active” in class as they are mentally interacting with the teaching intensively and “co-operating” with the teachers (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998).

Other studies have also contributed to the literature on the TCCL and the Chinese learner. It appears that, in this culture of learning, most students see knowledge as something to be transmitted by the teacher rather than discovered by the learners (Rao, 2001). A later study, Rao (2005), further emphasises three aspects of Chinese culture which have an important impact on attitudes and behaviours of Chinese learners. The first is collectivism and interdependent self in Chinese culture. Second, such a social orientation has resulted in socialisation for achievement. This can have a highly motivating effect on Chinese students because success and failure in a collectivist culture affect not just oneself but the whole family or group. Thus, in general, Chinese students are highly motivated in their EFL learning, and strongly believe in hard work and effort. Lastly, because of people’s attitudes to power and authority, it is apparent that teachers are authorities and students are passive learners.

Yet other studies on the Chinese culture of learning also highlight the roles and thus the relationship between teacher and learner. Their roles go beyond imparting and receiving of knowledge. Due to the deeply rooted Chinese tradition of seeing oneself as a part of a hierarchy of relationships, Chinese students respect their teachers as authority figures (Ho & Crookall, 1995). Closely related to the respect for authority is the matter of “face”. In particular, when communicating with another person, one must protect the other’s self-image and feelings, and avoid any direct confrontation. Hence, many Chinese students do not feel comfortable about challenging their teacher’s position on a given point. Teachers also find it difficult to admit any inadequacies on their part. Chinese students would thus not find autonomy very comfortable as this may entail working independently of the teacher and sharing in decision making, as well as presenting opinions that differ from those of the teacher.

This culture of learning among Chinese learners also has an impact on classroom practices. Wachob (2004) suggests the need to pay attention to three issues. First, basic to the Chinese student’s orientation to learning is the notion that anyone can learn if there is the right stimulus (p. 9). Second, with regards to the role of the teacher and the students, “teachers are seen as paternalistic, knowledgeable and keepers of knowledge” (p. 9). Finally, the Chinese student’s learning styles can fall into three categories or stages: the practical student who is a rote learner; the deep thinker who uses techniques to facilitate the understanding of concepts through memorisation; and the Confucian scholar who takes a mature approach by emphasising inner needs, self-improvement and contribution to society (p. 10). Parallel to these three types of learners from within the Chinese tradition is the Chinese student who is “affected by the presence of Western influence, which is most often seen among the young and felt more strongly in the large cities of China” (p. 10).

Some studies documented the influence of the TCCL on graduate students. In examining one such student’s socialisation into academic writing, a case study reported that the student prepared for his College English Test Band 4 (CET4) by

“memorizing vocabulary and doing practice tests”, practices associated with the TCCL (Li, Y., 2007). To prepare for CET6, the learner practised writing using templates from self-help books that “teach you what to write first, what to write next, and what words you should say. You give a statement, then the next sentence. . . . Build up the framework” (p. 59). This practice is akin to the modelling attributed to the TCCL. Another graduate student at a Canadian university recorded this in his or her reflective journal “our schooling is intensive, duck feeding, rigid, while in Canada students have more freedom and flexibility, . . . the competition in China is fierce” (Fang, Clarke, & Wei, 2016, p. 151). This learner’s reflection indicates the pervasive influence of the TCCL in his or her home context.

Some more recent studies indicate that the TCCL still has a strong influence among students from the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Gu (2010), researching national identity change among Chinese university students as a result of EFL learning, concludes that “the Confucian tradition, especially its educational ideals, is deeply ingrained in Chinese culture” (p. 57). Ten Chinese participants studying in an American university perceived that the English language education they had received in China as a test-oriented one (Shen, 2016). The learning strategies prepared them to pass tests but not for use in their study-abroad context. This finding is reminiscent of the exam-driven learning/teaching model of the TCCL.

The above research findings seem to concur on an almost homogeneous Chinese culture of learning. However, since the publication of Cortazzi and Jin (1996), there have been dissenting voices regarding the notion of a traditional Chinese culture of learning. Many of these are sceptical that the cultural angle alone can adequately account for the learner characteristics of, and assign an identity to, Chinese students; the Chinese learner is a more complex concept than can be explained by the framework of an all-pervasive learning culture. Some researchers and scholars have also offered other lens to examine the learner characteristics of Chinese students, challenging the idea of *the* Chinese learner as a single, homogeneous identity and suggesting instead a complex and fluid phenomenon of hybrid or multiple identities according to the specific contexts in which learners are situated. Indeed, many of these alternative views find resonance with my experience of teaching and researching PRC learners.

### 1.1.2 Dissent

One of the earliest dissenting voices is found in Biggs (1996), which although employing the term Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC) instead of the TCCL, takes issue with the “Western misperceptions” of the Chinese learning culture. It concedes that the CHC “features exist” (large classes in excess of 40, highly authoritarian orientation, expository teaching methods, focused preparation for examinations) but there is much more than meets the eye (p. 46). First, the paradox is this learning system has produced students “who outperform Western students in many subject areas” (p. 49). Moreover, the oft-quoted characteristic of rote learning could actually be a deep strategy of repetition with understanding and

not a surface approach of mechanical memorising without thought or meaning (p. 54). It is possible that the former strategy is more prevalent in CHC due to traditional beliefs about learning or because crucial life-paths are dependent on examination results. Repetitive learning is thus used to achieve and reinforce understanding with “intention” (p. 54), and to ensure accurate recall through rehearsing. Students can display both deep and surface strategies depending on the tasks and situations they encounter.

With regard to teacher–student relationships, Biggs (1996) informs us that the authoritarian and hierarchical orientation is characterised by warmth and a sense of responsibility on both sides, with much interaction taking place outside the classroom. This is especially true when both teachers and students live on campus; the shared environment gives rise to many shared activities (p. 56). Thus, the teacher–student relationship is not based merely on a simple transmission mode in the classroom but undergirded by a warm social context with much interaction. Teachers and students also share learning-related beliefs, values and practices that are probably internalised from a young age. These beliefs, values and practices are “precursors to a deep approach” (p. 63) and include attributions in terms of the students’ effort, strategy, interest; their metacognitive skills that help in directing effort and sustaining interest; and their recognition of group problem solving and the capacity to accept rules for social behaviour (p. 61). Given the learners’ deep approach to learning; the warm teacher–student relationship; and the shared attributions, metacognitive skills and social cohesion; the CHC classroom is not like the one often represented in the literature by Western teachers.

Another dissenting voice to the “portrait” of the Chinese learner and his oft-cited characteristic of reticence is Cheng (2000), arguing that it is “a dangerous allegation” (p. 435). Among the studies cited in this paper is Littlewood and Liu’s (1996, cited in Cheng, 2000, p. 438), which found that Hong Kong students at secondary and tertiary levels welcome opportunities for active participation. Cheng (2000) also drew on his teaching experience and observations to conclude that Chinese students can be “extremely active and even aggressive” (p. 438). The article then explores some possible reasons for the questionable interpretation of “cultural” reticence or passivity allegedly characteristic of Asian students and concludes that this is based on limited observation and small datasets. The causes of reticence when it does indeed occur are more likely to be context-specific rather than culturally determined. Chief among these causes are unsuitable teaching methodologies and inadequate levels of English language proficiency (p. 445).

Shedding further light on the complexity of the concepts of the Chinese learner and the TCCL, Gu (2003) compares two “successful” tertiary Chinese learners who scored above 90 percent in the CET4. From this case study which focuses on strategies for vocabulary learning, Gu details five Chinese conceptions of learning. First, successful learners know instinctively that vocabulary can be learnt both intentionally and incidentally. Second, repetition and memorisation are an integral part of meaningful learning. Third, these Chinese learners are pragmatic learners; the dichotomy of intrinsic versus extrinsic perhaps does not apply to them the way

it applies to their Western counterparts. Fourth, effort, perseverance and the joy of learning are consistent with Confucius' well-known saying from the *Analects*: "Is it not enjoyable to learn with a constant perseverance and application?" In Chinese culture, effort and perseverance are an integral and enjoyable part of the learning process. Lastly, while the ends of dichotomies, such as intentional and incidental learning, reliance on memorisation and meaning, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and perseverance and enjoyment, are often seen as good or bad if not mutually exclusive, Gu postulates that the ability to integrate seemingly opposing viewpoints might explain the paradox of why some Chinese learners achieve success even while practicing the supposedly bad strategy of rote learning. The Confucian philosophy of *the mean*, which is characterised by balances between opposing ends, might be the learning mechanism at work (Biggs, 1996, cited in Gu, 2003, p. 98).

It may be useful here to expand on one aspect of Gu's (2003) findings, that of motivation. The Chinese learner has been described as highly motivated (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Rao, 2005), and it is one of the learner characteristics of interest to my research. The literature indicates that this psychosocial dimension of learning is a complex construct. While putting forward a succinct working definition of motivation, Syed (2001) also acknowledges its complexity: "Motivation, or the desire and investment, in learning a language is far more complex than the static constructs usually used to measure it. . . . [T]here are sociocultural and psychosocial factors operating at the individual level" (p. 143). In his socio-educational model, Gardner (2001) posits that "motivation is a complex concept" in which effort, desire and positive affect are all necessary elements (p. 6). Extending the view of motivation beyond that of a concept, Williams, Burden, and Al-Baharna (2001) describe motivation as a "process (that) is complex, multi-faceted, and dynamic" (p. 183) and conclude that models on motivation ought to incorporate the factors arising from the interaction of the learners, the teacher, the task, and the whole environment.

To complexify the concept further, Gu (2003) distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; for example, one of the focal participants "appeared to be intrinsically interested in English while seeing its instrumental importance" (p. 94). Thus, the researcher seems to contrast motivation arising from intrinsic interest to that arising from instrumental or extrinsic factors. The classic definitions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are given by Ryan and Deci (2000) as follows. Intrinsic motivation reflects "the natural human propensity to learn and assimilate," while extrinsic motivation "can either reflect external control or true self-regulation" (p. 54). To elaborate, intrinsic motivation as opposed to extrinsic motivation refers to doing an activity simply for the enjoyment of the activity itself, rather than its instrumental value or in order to attain some separable outcome. From the above discussion, we may surmise that the motivation of the focal participants of my study is likely to be complex and multi-faceted and could be examined from various angles, such as extrinsic versus intrinsic, instrumental versus integrative.

Returning to the main discussion in this section, the debate on a homogeneous Chinese learner has been given a regional and economic angle in Hu (2003). While acknowledging the pervasive influence of the traditional TCCL, the researcher

reports that its force on ELT seems to vary from region to region within China, specifically between the more developed regions (coastal areas or large cities) and the less developed ones (inland or rural regions). Thus, there is no one uniform entity called “the Chinese learner”. Hu’s extensive study involved 439 PRC students over six cohorts enrolled in an intensive pre-matriculation English course in a tertiary institution in Singapore. In this study, conducted in an ESL context, the learners presented significant differences in the following: English proficiency, previous English learning experiences, classroom behaviours and language learning, and use of strategies. Generally, students from the more developed regions (MD) seemed to be less entrenched in the TCCL than their counterparts from the less developed regions (LD). To explain these regional differences, Hu offers three contributing factors which vary significantly between the MD and LD areas: infrastructural resources, sociocultural factors and, curricular and pedagogical practices. Due to the disparity in these factors, ELT in the MD regions have evolved further from the TCCL in recent years as compared to ELT in the LD regions. Thus, these regional differences indicate that not every Chinese student is steeped in the Chinese culture of learning. Interestingly, most of the focal participants of this study hailed from the MD; thus, based on these findings, we would expect them to be less influenced by the TCCL, as compared to students from the LD.

Hu’s (2003) finding that there are significant disparities among Chinese learners originating from different regions is supported by Feng (2009). As of 2007, officially, statistics cited that over 226 million students from primary schools to tertiary institutions in China study English under the tutelage of 85,000 teachers. However, besides regional differences, there are also social and ethnic divergences “in terms of local policies and practices in English language provision” (p. 85). For even within the same geographical location, access to resources for ELT can vary significantly from one social or ethnic group to another. This puts in question the notion of the Chinese learner as a homogeneous entity.

Going beyond examining the features of the TCCL, some researchers take issue with the “large culture” approach to stereotyping and explaining “the Chinese learner”. Clark and Gieve (2006) question this approach as it “adopts a notion of culture(s) that sees them in their most typical form as geographically (and often nationally) distinct entities, relatively unchanging and homogeneous, and as all-encompassing systems of rules or norms that substantially determine personal behaviour” (p. 55). They thus call for the problematisation of the constructed knowledges and identities of “the Chinese learner” in the literature.

What should be the way forward for research on Chinese learners then? Clark and Gieve (2006) suggest that large culture discourse needs to be examined by an alternative approach which seeks to understand, interpret and represent actual learners with whom we come into contact, who are contextualised by, and who create context in, classrooms. The classroom is an example of “small culture” (p. 63) which is co-constructed between students and teachers. Students in study-abroad situations may bring with them (some part of) their history and socioeconomic background to the small cultures but, faced with new realities, may develop very

different new identities, agencies and learning paths in their new communities of practice. Citing Morita's 2004 study, Clark and Gieve (2006) advocate the study approach that brings into focus the learners in local contexts, engaged as individuals in their struggles to transform themselves, and if possible, their contexts, in order to gain full participation (p. 65):

what is at stake in these linguistic, social and cultural transitions is learners' multiple identities, which become sites of contestation and renegotiation. The complexity . . . cannot be adequately captured by the view that assigns a single "Chinese learner" identity to all.

(p. 68)

Does it follow then that cultures of learning and learner identities are mutually exclusive notions? Interestingly, Shen (1998) brought together the two themes of the TCCL and learner identity in his book chapter, "The classroom and the wider culture: Identity as key to learning English composition." The TCCL was a very real and important part of his self and identity. In this autobiographical account of his struggle to reconcile his Chinese identity with a developing English identity, Shen emphasises repeatedly the influence of Chinese culture and how it was acted upon by his learning to write in English: "my cultural background shaped – and shapes – my approach to my writing in English and how writing in English redefined – and redefines – my ideological and logical identities" (p. 123). He further asserts that "many of the Chinese students whom [he] talked to said that they had the same or similar experiences" (p. 124). As a parallel to his experience, he alludes to another article in the same volume, "From silence to words: Writing as struggle" by Lu (1998) who describes her struggles between two selves and between two discourses.

In fact, in learning the rules of English composition while studying in America, Shen had to "reprogram" his mind "to redefine some of the basic concepts and values", including those about himself, "that had been imprinted and reinforced" in his life by his "cultural background". He asserts: "I came to English composition as a Chinese person, in the fullest sense of the term, with a Chinese identity already fully formed" (p. 127). Shen explains that the Chinese pattern of approaching the theme in writing, is "from surface to core" as opposed to the English pattern of using topic sentences. The former is akin to clearing the bushes before attacking the real target, a formalised, rhetorical pattern that goes back two thousand years to Confucius and requires one to first state the conditions of composition before touching one's main thesis (p. 128). This principle of composition has come to be called the *Ba Gu Wen* or "eight-legged essay," which still has an influence on modern Chinese writing. Thus, for Shen, the process of learning to write in English is in fact a process of creating and defining a new identity and balancing it with the old identity. The process added a new dimension and a new perspective to him.

Shen's self-report of a learner, steeped in and conscious of his Chinese cultural background, describing how he negotiated the development of his new English identity while balancing it with his old Chinese identity, suggests that it is possible

to study the two themes of TCCL and identity development together in the same learner or group of learners, a possibility that Clark and Gieve (2006) seem to discount. Both these themes were of interest to my research, and were among the facets I examined among the seven focal participants.

In more recent literature, the notion of the “Chinese learner” continue to be controversial. Wu’s (2015) case study of PRC graduate students’ intercultural learning experiences at British universities indicates that the students’ learning beliefs and behaviours undergo transitions through their participation in new, authentic contexts. Thus, Wu asserts that, to develop intercultural pedagogy and classrooms, stereotypes of Chinese students need to be discarded. Teachers should consider similarities as well as diversity among students from the same culture in their response to the learners’ evolving needs and interests.

### 1.1.3 *Winds of change*

To complicate the picture further, some studies suggest that the TCCL and the Chinese learners may be dynamic, evolving entities. In a contrastive study on strategy use by “successful” and “unsuccessful” students, Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons (2004) found that the greater variety of learning or practising strategies and the more sophisticated use of strategies by the successful students, as compared to the unsuccessful students, might be related to the former’s overall English learning goal. Another study, Poole (2005), suggests that, generally, Chinese EFL learners are active strategy users. He concludes that “such results refute the stereotype held by many Western-trained ESL/EFL teachers that Chinese learners are docile, teacher-dependent, and lack autonomy” (p. 47). In the abovementioned studies, both their strategy use and goal-setting indicate that Chinese learners are not passive learners as reported in the literature on the TCCL, but are instead more active managers of their own English learning. It may also be possible that Chinese students have developed new attitudes and ways of learning.

For an overview of language learning strategies of students in Chinese ELT, we may look at Zhang’s study (2003). He surveyed two decades of research into Chinese EFL learner strategies and concluded that the research design and instrumentation in this area have become more mature since its beginnings in the 1980s. In general, there are differences in the use of language learning strategies between “successful” or “good” and “less successful” or “poor” learners. However, it is inconclusive whether the strategies in the studies reviewed are comparable due to the fact that different instruments were used in collecting data. It is also not certain if some findings are statistically significant because of variations in the size of the samples or number of variables involved. Thus, Zhang suggests that further consistent, well-designed studies be conducted to obtain a clearer picture of Chinese learners’ use of strategies.

Yet another study that underscores the changing profile of Chinese learners is Shi’s (2006) questionnaire survey of 400 Shanghai junior and senior middle school students. The study was conducted to investigate the apparent contradictions in



the literature on Chinese students: being passive, submissive, or disciplined versus valuing active thinking, open-mindedness and a spirit of inquiry. She first compares the contradicting interpretations of Confucianism in education, showing that it is a multi-dimensional concept, before discussing her empirical study. The results show “something new”, “something old” (p. 137) and “something mixed” (p. 138).

What is “new” is that the results challenge the view that Chinese students are passive, submissive or lacking in critical thinking. The respondents preferred “equality with their teachers to an inflexible hierarchy”. They would query their teachers if they did not agree with what was taught, with the belief that the teachers were willing to answer their questions “at the right juncture” (p. 137). The respondents also took a critical approach with regard to their textbooks, learning environment and studies. They were also clear about their purposes for learning – for self-interest – which was very different from the motivation reported in Hu’s (2002) study – for the glory of the family (a presumably Confucius-inspired value). Moreover, the respondents were active learners who used different language learning strategies and who preferred a more light-hearted, interactive classroom.

However, the data also surfaced “old” traits which concurred with those in previous studies on the Chinese culture of learning. Being knowledgeable remained the most important measure for good teachers, while perseverance and diligence were overwhelmingly those of good students. Exams remained a prime concern and an important yardstick: good teachers should help students pass exams, and students still found passing exams the most important reason for studying English.

Thus, characteristics attributed to the TCCL and those not usually associated with it co-existed in the students’ responses, presenting a “mixed” picture. However, Shi qualified that there were certain limitations: the survey was carried out in Shanghai, the most affluent of Chinese cities, and sampling was opportunistic. So the results could have been affected by the socioeconomic backgrounds of the students and teachers involved. This study could also have been triangulated by a parallel survey of the teachers. Drawing on these findings of both traditional and new features in the participants’ responses, Shi cautioned against oversimplifying the descriptions of Chinese learners based on previous studies. Instead, we should consider “the variety of their national, regional, economic, class and cultural backgrounds as well as age, religion and gender” (p. 139). We need to treat the notion of the TCCL more critically, taking into account the fast changing social landscape in China.

It may be true then that, along with the changing Chinese social landscape, the TCCL and “the Chinese learner” have been evolving too. A decade after their 1996 publication, Jin and Cortazzi (2006) provided an update on their insights in an article aptly titled, “Changing Practices in Chinese Learning Cultures”. Based on their research of Chinese students in the United Kingdom, they maintained that the Chinese culture of learning still provided a framework for these learners to interpret others’ actions and talk in the classroom as well as to guide their own behaviour. However, the authors highlighted the need to speak of “cultures” as a reminder that “Chinese peoples embrace a wide range of social and individual diversity within



mainland China and Chinese elsewhere . . . yet sharing a relatively homogeneous linguistic and cultural heritage” (p. 9). This acknowledgement of diversity among learners apparently provides an answer to Clark and Gieve’s objection (2006, p. 57) of the lack of distinction of the many Chinese groups in the notion of the TCCL.

In yet another update, the two researchers, emphasised the importance of teachers recognising cultures of learning as such recognition “can be part of validating the students’ individualities, social identities, and cultural voices” (Cortazzi & Jin, 2013, p. 2). This can lead learners to develop new ways of learning while teachers grow in their professional development. Cultural synergy results when there is ongoing peer dialogue as well as teacher–student dialogue, reflection and reciprocal learning about one another’s cultures of learning, “while acknowledging diversity and difference within and between cultural communities” (pp. 2, 3). The above emphasis on embracing both culture and individuality in a reciprocal framework indicates that Cortazzi and Jin (2013) have tried to address the concerns put forward by other authors like Atkinson (1999, cited in Yuan & Xie, 2013, p. 33): “[S]uch research must always be balanced with, and ideally incorporated into, perspectives that reveal the individuality and agency of those who have already been deeply socialised and enculturated.”

Recent literature indicates that the TCCL still exerts substantial influence on the current generation of students, while evolving amidst a changing landscape. A questionnaire survey at a key Chinese university in Shandong Province among 691 students originating from 26 provinces concludes that “Confucianism has strong and lasting influence on the Chinese culture of learning since most [respondents] . . . strongly agree with major aspects of a traditional conceptualization of education” (Wang, 2013, p. 74). For instance, effort is still considered “the essential preparatory step to achieving future success” (p. 70). However, there are also transitions in attitudes towards certain traditional methods of learning; some students appear to be less reliant on memorisation and rote learning (p. 70).

## 1.2 Chinese learners in study-abroad contexts: Singapore and Western settings

With growing internationalisation in higher education (henceforth HE), an ever-increasing number of PRC students have been venturing abroad for tertiary studies. According to the Ministry of Education of the PRC, “608,400 Chinese students left the country to pursue advanced studies overseas in 2017 . . . an 11.74% increase on 2016 and cementing China’s position as the world’s largest source country for international students” (2018, April 4). In American universities alone in 2016/2017, the number of Chinese students was 350,755, an increase of 6.8 percent over the previous year (Open Doors, 2017). It is not surprising then that researchers have given greater attention to studying this group of learners, and their findings have extended our understanding of the PRC students’ characteristics and transitions.

To begin with, living and studying abroad may seem to offer international students, including Chinese learners, the opportunities of contact with and practice in

the target language; but this is not always true as there can be obstacles to access to input and contact with members of the local community (Byram & Feng, 2006). This was indeed the experience of the five immigrant women that Norton (2000) studied in a Canadian context. International students often have to make academic, linguistic and sociocultural adjustments to their new learning contexts.

Many views have been put forward for helping international students to adjust to their study-abroad contexts. One accepted notion is that they should be making the adjustment to the host countries' learning and teaching cultures. An alternative view is "cultural synergy" (Jin & Cortazzi, 2001) which calls for mutual and reciprocal effort from teachers and learners to learn about, understand and appreciate others' cultures and their perceptions of learning. Yet another perspective suggests that the cultural background factor may be over-estimated as students generally are quick to adapt; the traditional model of the passive and overly deferential East Asian student has also been challenged (Rastall, 2004). As the focal participants of my study were essentially experiencing a study-abroad context, let us examine the situated characteristics and transitions of Chinese learners in English-medium universities in Singapore and Western countries, two settings that are most pertinent to our discussion.

### 1.2.1 *Singapore settings*

Research on PRC learners in Singapore has covered such aspects as language learning strategies, metacognitive awareness, anxiety, confidence, learner characteristics and changing identities. The research on this specific group of learners in Singapore does not have a long history; thus, the review in this sub-section will attempt to trace the unfolding knowledge in a chronological order but also point out similarities or contrasts between studies where appropriate.

In an early study to investigate what learning strategies are employed by Chinese learners and whether language proficiency and gender have any impact on the choice of these strategies, Kwah and Goh (1996) studied a total of 175 participants enrolled in a university in Singapore. The *Secondary Level English Proficiency* (SLEP) Test was used to assess the students' proficiency; the results separated the learners (aged 17–19, with 50 females and 125 males) into three levels of proficiency: high, medium and low. The 5-point *Strategies in Language Learning* (SLL) designed by Oxford (1990, cited in Kwah & Goh, 1996) was used to obtain data on the kind of strategies that the students used. The analysis showed that these learners "generally did not apply learning strategies very frequently" (p. 15). The two most commonly reported strategies were metacognitive and compensation. The results from the analysis of variance indicated that high-proficiency students used significantly the most cognitive strategies. They also used compensation strategies more than their low-proficiency counterparts. With regard to the influence of gender, the t-test results showed that "female students reported using significantly more compensation and affective strategies than male students" (p. 17).

Another study used the learner diary to research the metacognitive awareness that PRC students at a Singapore university had about their listening (Goh, 1997). The analysis of the diaries of the 40 subjects with an average age of 19 revealed that these students “had clear ideas about three aspects of listening: their own role and performance as second language listeners, the demands and procedures of second language listening, and strategies for listening” (p. 361). The diaries, kept over ten weeks, demonstrated the high degree of metacognitive awareness that the students possessed and their ability to verbalise their theories about learning to listen in English. This study using the learner diary as an instrument for longitudinal research with a small sample was of interest to my study.

Another study of interest to my research was Zhang (2001) which examined the affective dimension of Chinese learners enrolled in a Singapore tertiary institution. How anxious do these Chinese learners feel when learning English in a study-abroad context? His findings were particularly pertinent as the participants in both studies shared similar demographic features and educational backgrounds: PRC students enrolled in a Singapore university BC prior to matriculation for undergraduate programmes. Both groups may be defined as ESL learners (Cohen, 1998) as they were learning a language in a community where it is spoken (p. 4), as opposed to EFL, where they are learning one in a context where it is not. Using a *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* and informal interviews, Zhang compared two groups of students: seventy SM3 aged around nineteen and seventy-five SM2 with an average age of eighteen. The findings indicated that all the learners experienced a certain level of anxiety during their BC. Thus, I became aware that anxiety might be an important category for my study.

To guide our Chinese students to reflect on their learning experiences during their BC and develop and evaluate knowledge relating to their own person, strategies and tasks, Young and Fong (2003) carried out a longitudinal learner diary study over six months with a group of thirty-eight students. The study found evidence that the learner diary could be used to raise the SM3 students’ metacognitive awareness. There were indications that reflecting regularly on their learning journey and acting upon the reflections did help the learners make progress.

As a follow-up study to the above longitudinal one, a summative or exit diary was used to gather data on the learner characteristics of another group of PRC SM3 students (Fong, 2006). Towards the end of their six-month BC, a small sample of seventeen learners were invited to reflect on their English language learning experience in a single diary entry. These participants could respond to any of a set of ten prompts relating to the learners’ motivation, beliefs, attitudes, strategies and affective factors. The results of the analysis pointed to a mainly instrumental orientation, clear beliefs about language learning, the importance of the affective dimension and social support, and the emphasis on effort for achievement. Self-monitoring and strategy use did not appear to be deliberate or consistent. The learning context of the BC appeared to have been beneficial, as was receiving positive feedback for their learning activities and the teachers’ methodology, skills and personality. The learner

characteristics and perceptions gleaned from this study contributed to my doctoral study in terms of the initial selection of *a priori* categories.

Another research project involving Chinese SM3 students was Teng's (2008) ethnographic study of undergraduates in NUS. Among the participants was Ming (pseudonym), a "transnational" from China, who successfully made use of various social structures and resources around him in Singapore to acquire the cultural capital he needed to construct a sense of belonging to the local community and to aid in his development of literacy. The study examined how Ming and his peers (all former PRC SM3 students) developed and projected hybrid identities as a result of the social contexts surrounding their engagement in academic literacy practices (p. 207), a phenomenon which seems to support Clark and Gieve's (2006) assertion that new identities are forged as learners engage with their new contexts.

Ming's agency and investment were evidenced by his learning the standard variety of Singapore English used in academic settings (often called Educated Singapore English) as well as the local colloquial variety ("Singlish"). He indicated that the linguistic resources he had been equipped with during his BC had helped him overcome the initial difficulty he had with using English. After the BC, he employed several learning strategies to continue his efforts to improve his English: watching English news on television, interacting online with friends in English via email and chat rooms, and interacting with locals (p. 228). During the English for Academic Purposes course in his freshman year, he actively engaged in the learning activities and with his fellow students. On one occasion, he earned his tutor's praise for an academic literacy event, a group oral presentation (p. 230). All these efforts moved him as a legitimate peripheral participant towards the core of the community. The concept of legitimate peripheral participation highlights the situation that "learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires learners to move toward full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). This case study of Ming constitutes a parallel study to my multiple-case research as its focal participants were also SM3 students and hence younger counterparts of Ming. It is likely that they share some common characteristics and transitions.

According to Teng's analysis of Ming's narratives, his inward trajectory in his Community of Academic Literacy Practice (CALP) in NUS was the result of three factors: the support of his family and friends, particularly those of the SM3 community; the learning resources, for example, his teachers from the SM3 BC; and his motivation and initiative in using strategies such as creating opportunities for language practice and self-study. As a result of his sociocultural and academic backgrounds in China and more recent sociocultural and academic experiences in Singapore, Ming, like many of his fellow SM3 scholars, formed "a new hybrid SM3 identity" (p. 233). Teng points out that this identity construction of the Chinese students takes place against the background of the SM3 community which, uniquely, exists at two levels. The first is the physical, visible community that SM3 students participate in during the first six months of their lives in Singapore when they are enrolled in the bridging course. The second is "an imagined community

that can be said to comprise all those who continue to identify themselves as SM3 scholars and/or those who are identified as such” (p. 233). Thus, transnational PRC students like Ming and his peers develop a new hybrid identity in a CALP as a result of their experiences in a new study-abroad context.

While Ming’s participation in his CALP seemed to have progressed quite smoothly, some Chinese students pursuing university degrees in Singapore do encounter sociocultural difficulties in adapting to their new learning context. A study on a small sample of 20 PRC learners reports that this was especially apparent in “their social interaction and communication with Singaporeans and people of other ethnicities . . . language problems in the form of ‘Singlish’ proved to be difficult for almost all the participants in their attempt to relate to others” (Dimmock & Ong, 2010, p. 10). However, the researchers conclude that while these participants experienced difficulties, they displayed determination in various ways and personal resilience in overcoming the problems. For example, the group which Dimmock and Ong (2010) classified as “intellectuals” (the other two groups being “opportunists” and “loyalists”) were dedicated to achieving academic success. They invested much time in self-study in their transition from teacher-centred to student-centred learning.

Cultural and linguistic differences, and difficulties with Singlish feature in yet another study on PRC students in Singapore universities (Yang, 2014). In addition, the findings indicate that some of the participants perceive that their Chinese accents, sometimes influenced by their Chinese regional varieties, are considered “funny” or “disturbing” by some locals (p. 18). On the other hand, the Chinese students feel that their local peers’ communication in Mandarin leaves much to be desired. Some Chinese students’ studious disposition and others’ tendency to remain in their comfort zones also convey the impression that they are anti-social or socially inept. “Many ‘PRC scholars’ barely have Singaporeans whom they could comfortably call ‘friends’” (p. 18). However, this study-abroad experience is also “self-transformative” for the Chinese students as “they develop more cosmopolitan and well-rounded subjectivities and sensibilities” (p. 21). The transition may have been painful initially, but the learners also derive a strong sense of agency and success through their learning journey.

To round off this sub-section on PRC students in the Singapore learning context, I will mention my study on the learner characteristics of this group of learners and their transitions (Fong, 2014) briefly, since I have already described it in the Prologue. The project was a longitudinal study of seven focal participants who enrolled in a BC in NUS before they matriculated in an UDP. The five key findings on Chinese students are as follows. The TCCL is foundational but cannot account for all learner characteristics and transitions of the Chinese learners. Their new ESL and EIL learning context, comprising curriculum and community, provides learners with opportunities and empowerment to advance in their learning journeys. Their beliefs about learning a language influence their choice of learning and practising strategies; enlarging their vision of learning also fuels their action in learning. Their motivation and identity underscore the power of real and imagined communities;

they seek transformation according to what they experience and aspire to be. Affect matters to the learners; they are propelled by the trajectory of their emotions, which feature prominently in their learning journeys.

### 1.2.2 *Western contexts*

Turning now to research on PRC students in Western study-abroad contexts, we will survey studies that cover various aspects such as the affective dimension, strategy use, expectations, perceptions, adjustments to new cultures of learning, pedagogical implications, learner beliefs, autonomy and recommendations for support. Although some of the studies may refer to a broader group of subjects, like East Asian learners, we can assume that PRC learners are included within the group under study since they form the largest group of international students globally. Many of the studies come from the perspectives of university teachers and administrators, and offer useful insights on the Chinese students' learner characteristics and transitions.

In British ELT circles, there has been a growing interest in international learners, including Chinese and other East Asian learners, resulting in dedicated conferences and publications. For example, an international conference organised by Portsmouth University in 2004 had as its theme, *Responding to the needs of Chinese learners in HE*. Many of these conferences and publications feature studies on the (unmet) needs of Chinese learners and the sociocultural, academic and linguistic difficulties they experience in their transition to their new learning contexts. Along with the reports on the problems, suggestions on pedagogical implications and practical (mainly sociocultural and administrative) support to alleviate the problems are also offered.

In general, dissonance in expectations and perceptions between Chinese students and staff of a tertiary institution can present problems for both sides (Smith & Zhou, 2009). On the one hand, the institution, as represented by the staff, expects the students to “come and consume its [education] service”, using the support mechanisms available to meet their needs, as learners who are mature, independent, critical and assertive. On the other hand, the young Chinese learners are accustomed to being “educated and fostered by authoritative and parental teachers” who know individual students' strengths and weaknesses and provide the necessary help (p. 141). Thus, for these students, the difficulties they experience in their transition to United Kingdom higher education “arise not only out of language barriers, perceived cultural differences, but also from their socialisation into adulthood” (p. 142). To address the dissonance between institution and students, the authors propose the following measures: more help to aid the Chinese students with developing their essay writing skills, institutional consideration of the students' “demographic and sociocultural backgrounds” and regular informal meetings for staff and students at different levels (p. 142).

Overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers is a major issue for Chinese students (Devlin & Peacock, 2009). Some Chinese students feel that the academics do not take into account the fact that their first language is not English. This difficulty is compounded when these students need time when formulating their questions in

English, which in turn may be interpreted as a lack of engagement. Some also find it difficult to listen to their tutors' speech; this aggravates their lack of confidence in asking questions, being unsure what has been said. In terms of accommodation, they do not favour the practice of putting all the Chinese learners together. Overall, the students are very conscious of their difficulties with understanding the UK culture and working environments.

In terms of the teacher–student relationship, whilst they anticipate a distinct hierarchy in universities, Chinese learners expect “a professional closeness to their tutors” (Edwards & Ran, 2009, p. 30). They do not understand why UK tutors emphasise that students should only approach them in class or at appointed times. Thus, UK staff seem distant and impolite, and their encouragement to students to be independent is seen by Chinese students as indifference. On the other hand, UK academics seem to “see Chinese students as overly demanding. They are frustrated when the students do not speak in seminars then queue up later to see them” (p. 30).

The different perspectives are also apparent in academic practices. Chinese students tend to develop their confidence in their skills through deference to the written word (Edwards & Ran, 2009). Thus, memorisation of texts is seen as providing social harmony and demonstrating respect for authors and persistence on the part of the student, perceived as a key characteristic in the Chinese culture of learning. However, according to UK expectations, Chinese students are seen as being weak in terms of critical analysis and problem solving. Also, Chinese students show their respect for their tutor through using his or her words. The level of their English proficiency may hamper attempts at paraphrasing. In this connection, the two researchers stress the developmental nature of plagiarism which tapers off by a student's second or third year of study, as it is primarily an early-stage coping strategy.

The classroom practice of using group work is culturally challenging for Chinese students who have to be persuaded of its usefulness (Edwards & Ran, 2009). A group consisting of entirely Chinese students is seen as reducing their opportunities for English language development on the one hand, but on the other hand, it is also seen as increasing the sense of ownership of the activities. The two researchers view the polarisation of the two approaches as unnecessary, so is frowning on the use of Mandarin in group discussions: “[S]tudents tend to mix languages and this can benefit the flow of the discussion and improve students' specific English vocabulary which can be used in other settings” (p. 31). Overall, a more holistic and open-minded approach (with appropriate structures) is needed to support international students, including Chinese learners.

Different learning cultures may also give rise to “learning shock” for learners who make the transition to studying in the United Kingdom (Forland, 2006). The East Asian learner comes from a culture with a collectivistic tradition in which academic success is measured by the ability to reproduce knowledge, while the culture of the United Kingdom is much more individualistic, in which academic success is measured by critical analysis and knowledge extension. Students suffering from learning shock may lose confidence, feel inadequately prepared and unable to engage with the learning environment.



Similar problems may be faced by young postgraduate Chinese students in another Western context, the United States. According to Huang (2012), the transitioning challenges that these students face include dissonance with teachers in learning cultures in higher learning (Chinese and American), learning to live into adulthood and learning to learn in an adult learning setting. Thus, they experience both culture shock and learning shock and need support mechanisms that “can be built into the mentoring culture to encourage communications” (p. 144). They may also need directions in setting learning goals and plans, and acquiring the necessary study skills.

Looking more specifically at study skills, Chinese students are found to use a wide range of strategies in one study, including metacognitive, cognitive, social/affective and compensation strategies to manage their adjustment to a new learning environment (Li, D., 2007). The four informants, all research students, were not enrolled in a formal language programme but tried to manage their second language learning in a predominantly naturalistic environment. During the retrospective oral interviews they gave, they reported mainly metacognitive strategies, suggesting that they were self-directed learners attempting to manage their own learning informally. Another observation was that there seemed to be a dynamic relationship between the learners’ levels of proficiency in English, motivation, beliefs about language learning, cultural habits of learning and strategy use. However, there are no indications of strong cultural tendencies. These findings suggest that learner characteristics do not operate separately but impact one another in an interrelated manner.

Based on the above findings, several implications can be drawn for Chinese students in study-abroad contexts. First, understanding and empathy would be helpful for these learners in their efforts to overcome the different challenges they face. Second, beyond in-session language courses, institutional support may be needed. These include training sessions aimed at raising awareness of the processes and strategies in second language acquisition, support networks and/or onsite support for specific areas of weaknesses in their language.

With regard to learner beliefs, what transitions do Chinese students experience? Hughes and Gao (2008) reported on a questionnaire study that investigated changes in students’ beliefs about English language learning at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC), which could be compared to a study-abroad situation. The students of UNNC are in a “hybrid immersion context” as the institution is an English-medium university in a predominantly Chinese social and communicative situation. The results indicate that the learning context does influence the Chinese learners’ beliefs regarding their confidence/anxiety in learning and using English, and the respective roles of the teacher and the student. The students demonstrate confidence in taking greater charge of their learning, especially outside the classroom. This in turn points to the behaviour of autonomous learners, which does not concur with the “typical” profile of passive and dependent Chinese learners in the literature. However, the students still defer to their teachers when it comes to monitoring progress and organising classroom activities. Thus, a “mixed” picture of the Chinese learner is presented here as in Shi’s (2006) study.



The Chinese learners' presence in the international education scene has continued to grow in prominence and a dedicated volume. *International Education and the Chinese Learner* (Ryan & Slethaug, 2010) highlights their increasing numbers. It reports that "in 2007 alone, according to the *China Daily*, 200,000 students from China went abroad" (Wang, 2008, cited in Slethaug, 2010, p. 25). In view of "the complexity of international education in this age of globalized learning and the complexity of Chinese learners inside and outside China in many different countries and contexts," Slethaug advocates more studies on issues relating to these learners (p. 36).

One aspect that the contributors to the volume take issue with is the Western perceptions of the Chinese learner which "remain largely based on outmoded and stereotypical assumptions" (Ryan, 2010, p. 37). She asserts that "it is imperative that those working with Chinese students, either in Chinese or Western contexts, have an informed understanding of the contemporary realities and complexities of both Anglophone and Asian educational contexts" (p. 37). The Western "stereotypical assumptions" encompass both prevailing "deficit" and more recent "surplus" views of Chinese learners (p. 38). Western teachers often seem to identify the "deficits" of their international students "in contrast to academic values supposedly possessed by Western students" (p. 39), describing the former as "rote, passive and superficial learners lacking critical thinking skills" (p. 41). On the other hand, "surplus" theories often depict CHC learners as possessing "Confucian educational values" and, thus, they are cooperative, diligent, deep learners with "a high regard for education" (p. 47). Ryan maintains that these polarised stereotypes are unhelpful, and even harmful and offensive to the Chinese students: international students she has worked with have highlighted "their loss of identity and self-esteem" (pp. 49–50). The contributor thus argues for "a daily negotiation process . . . in the direct contact between teachers and students in more globalized contexts" (p. 52).

The issues of culture, identity and contexts are taken up by other contributors to the volume. Vinther (2010) offers interesting insights from her teaching experience at the University of Southern Denmark (USD), where Chinese students comprise "the second largest foreign student population, outnumbered only by students from the other Scandinavian countries" (p. 111). Vinther underlines the need to understand the attitudes of the learners and "their co-existence with the prevailing expectations at the receiving universities," that is, the learners' adaptation in "the context of the educational environment" (p. 114).

At the USD, "the expectation is that students are active in choosing for themselves"; at the same time, there is little tendency to tag Chinese learners with a cultural group identity (p. 116). In comparing Chinese, Southern European and local students, Vinther found that both foreign student groups "expect a certain amount of rote learning and reproduction of the teachers' lectures" (p. 118). Yet, it appears that the Chinese students adapt more successfully to their new environment than their Southern European counterparts: they take Danish lessons, work part-time like Scandinavian students, and travel to other European countries. All this results in the Chinese learners building mutual understanding and relationships with

Danes and other groups, even outside USD. Citing another qualitative study which compared Chinese learners with European ones (Bissonauth-Bedford & Coverdale-Jones, 2002, cited in Vinther, 2010, pp. 121, 122), Vinther indicates that both groups expect the existence of a power-distance component in the teacher–student relationship, expressing the need for respect to teachers. Yet, the Chinese students tried quickly to adjust to the culture of mutual respect and democratic interaction expected in the Danish classroom. Thus, “the tacit cultural-context knowledge needs to be made more visible” to facilitate “awareness-raising” and to help international, including Chinese, students adjust to new learning contexts (p. 126).

Chinese students’ identity was examined in another study in the UK context, which concludes that the six participants reconstructed their Chinese national identities as a result of their academic life and social interactions (Gao, 2011). Being offered “an alternative set of cultural values and way of interpreting the world” in their study-abroad context, the students developed greater awareness of “the uniqueness of Chinese culture and the impact of different values and beliefs” on intercultural communication (p. 301). The author thus advocates that language teachers be sensitive to and respectful of the second language learners’ (including the PRC students’) national identities; they need to create a positive atmosphere for effective communication. On their part, learners need to develop sensitivity to and respect for others whose cultural backgrounds and values differ from their own. Controversial political topics should be handled with care in the language classroom to avoid conflict and misunderstanding.

The issues of student identity and learning context were also explored in a comparative study of Chinese and Vietnamese students by Phan, McPherron, and Phan (2011). The results indicate that for both groups, “students and teachers do not just have multiple identities, but . . . multiple *identifications*” (p. 152). The word “identification” points to the ongoing work of all identity processes in ELT classes where teachers and students “adopt . . . many discourses, ideas, and affiliations” (p. 152). This study presents an interesting perspective of the evolving identities of Chinese students and their English teachers in specific learning contexts.

So far, the literature seems to have presented the learning experience of “the Chinese learner” in study-abroad contexts as a one-way phenomenon; more recent studies have added new perspectives. In this age of globalisation and unprecedented academic mobility, international education should not be regarded as only from the West to the East (Ryan, 2013). There are possibilities for building mutual understanding and adaptation (Xu, 2011). This two-way exchange can result in Western teachers and students learning from “the wealth of experience and knowledge that Chinese students and academics bring to the Western academy” (Ryan, 2013, p. 56). However, “meaningful intercultural learning” is only possible if learners and teachers share “mutually defined practices, beliefs and understanding”, while the value of diversity and differing learning cultures should be recognised by educational institutions and integrated into curriculum and pedagogy (Wu, 2015, p. 765).

Attention should also focus on the tension between the institutions’ agendas and the learners’ needs as surfaced in a collaborative programme between

a Chinese university and a Canadian one. The researchers concluded that the needs of the PRC learners could have been more carefully considered before the two institutions mounted the joint study-abroad programme based on existing norms and expectations of the Canadian university's international postgraduate programme (Fang, Clarke, & Wei, 2016). This conclusion was apparent when the group of PRC students were characterised as reluctant speakers during their Canadian sojourn due to various factors: the language barrier, unfamiliar teaching approaches, the expectation to become critical learners, identity challenges and the double translation bind ("translate the questions from English to Chinese and then translate their answers from Chinese to back to English") (p. 149). Yet, half of the students reported that they would have preferred the Canadian university's instructors to call on them by name (rather than directing open-ended questions to the whole class); they just "needed a little push to speak up" (pp. 149–150). However, these learners did perceive that they benefited from their study-abroad experience, as the course "broadened their view on what and how teaching and learning could occur" (p. 152).

Another recent study that examined the transitions of PRC postgraduates in a study-abroad context investigated the challenges encountered by a group of learners in HE in the United Kingdom and the strategies they adopt to overcome their difficulties (Wu, 2015). The four challenges to effective learning for Chinese postgraduates are identified as classroom participation, group learning, teaching and learning and assessment techniques. In all four areas, the learners have to adapt to a new culture of learning from the one they were accustomed to in China. To counter the challenges, first, the learners probe their previous learning culture and adjust their learning modes, adopt new skills and observe others at the host university. This active stance seems to counter the stereotypical image of the passive Chinese student. "The most academically successful of the interviewed students developed a context-oriented learning attitude" (p. 762). Second, the students leverage teachers' feedback to self-monitor and adjust their learning behaviour when necessary. Thus, feedback facilitates their transition to a new academic culture. Third, an inclusive class atmosphere and sensitivity to cultural diversity in the pedagogical practices are helpful conditions, and teachers play a major role in mitigating anxiety levels. The findings indicate that "when selecting course resources and designing learning tasks, an appreciation of the value of pluralism contributed to the formation of an open and positive attitude to learning" (p. 763). Lastly, the students' transitions can be further supported by social media and online learning systems such as Blackboard. The ability to access course materials and other resources in their own time offers the PRC learners flexibility and independence in their learning. The students are particularly appreciative of the fact that they can "obtain timely support" from their teachers (p. 764). Thus, the study demonstrates that learners can and do adjust their learning approaches according to their interaction with their context.

The changes and challenges faced by PRC students in the UK's HE context were also investigated by Liu (2013). The participants, however, comprised both undergraduates and postgraduates during their initial three months in the United

Kingdom. The results were fairly similar to those of Wu's (2015) study. In terms of transitions, the learners adjusted their language system (listening and speaking) to the new context through language use, leaned heavily on translation, and developed new conceptual knowledge. As for challenges, they encountered speaking, writing and reading difficulties as well as academic culture shock. Liu argues that "context plays a significant role" in the changes (p. 138) and draws implications for both study-abroad students and their teachers. The former should recognise that language proficiency is not a necessary consequence of studying abroad. Students need to take charge of their own learning and be proactive in both formal and informal learning settings. They should reconceptualise language learning, changing from language learners to language users. On the other hand, teachers could provide scaffolding for international students through their speech, including a slower pace and standard pronunciation. They could also facilitate peer support and communication, and greater opportunities for discussions in diversified groups. Relevant feedback on students' language in speaking and writing would be helpful. Teachers also need to reconceptualise the relationship between learners and the language they are learning, considering the cultural differences between China and the United Kingdom.

In this section on the Chinese students in study-abroad contexts, we see a thread that runs through the different studies. There are indeed obstacles to living and learning in their new learning contexts. However, whether these impediments appear in the form of language barriers, academic challenges, cultural differences (local, institutional, etc.) or more personal issues, they are not insurmountable. There is growing awareness of the needs of this group of students as they make the transition to HE in their host countries. Equally important is the increasing awareness of what changes and help are needed to support them. The research on Chinese students provide insights on their experiences, learner characteristics and transitions, as well as inform the pedagogical implications to be drawn to help these learners succeed. On the other hand, the Chinese learners can and do make the necessary effort to achieve their goals. The example of Ming in Teng (2008) should inspire us that success stories are within our students' grasp if only they reach out for them, with all the support that they can garner from teachers, institution and community.

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# 2

## CULTURE

### Foundational but not all-encompassing

#### 2.1 The traditional Chinese culture of learning (TCCL)

The findings of my study present two main strands of information on the TCCL. One is the TCCL learning/teaching context as seen through the eyes of the seven focal participants. That picture gives us an idea of how close the literature is to the learning culture experienced by these students first-hand. The other strand has to do with the participants themselves: how extensively or deeply they demonstrate or embody the characteristics of the “typical” TCCL learner. To remind ourselves of the characteristics of this learning culture and the “typical” learner, reproduced below is a summary of the characteristics gleaned from the literature.

The TCCL learning/teaching context or the TCCL learner is described as exhibiting the following characteristics:

- 1 Large classes and thus limited exposure/individual practice (Biggs, 1996, p. 46; Fusheng & Rao, 2007)
- 2 Transmission/expository teaching methods (Biggs, 1996, p. 46; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998, p. 102)
- 3 Imitation model of learning (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006, p. 9; Li, 2007, p. 59; Lu, 1998, p. 75)
- 4 Exam-driven learning/teaching (Biggs, 1996, p. 46, 54; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006, p. 11; Li, 2007, p. 59)
- 5 Teacher as authority/model (Biggs, 1996, p. 46; Fusheng & Rao, 2007, p. 30; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998, p. 102; Wachob, 2004, p. 9)
- 6 Emphasis on mastery of knowledge (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998, p. 102)
- 7 Emphasis on learning from texts (Fusheng & Rao, 2007, p. 30; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998, p. 102)

- 8 Memorisation of vocabulary and/or grammar (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998, p. 102; Li, 2007, p. 59; Wachob, 2004, p. 10)
- 9 Strong belief in effort for achievement (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998, p. 102; Rao, 2005, p. 54)
- 10 Passivity/lack of autonomy (Ho & Crookall, 1995; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998, p. 104; Ni, 2008; Rao, 2005, p. 54)

## 2.2 TCCL as experienced by the focal participants

In their diary entries and interview responses, the seven focal participants often reflected on their learning experiences in China prior to joining the Bridging Course (BC) and in the process commented on certain TCCL characteristics. Among them they mentioned all ten of the above characteristics, and the data they provided affirmed much of what is depicted in the literature on the Chinese learning/teaching context. It appears that the Chinese culture of learning was prevalent during the time these participants attended school in China; thus, they observed and experienced the influence of the TCCL first-hand. In this section, we view the TCCL characteristics as seen through the eyes of the seven focal learners. However, these characteristics might have been experienced and perceived by these learners as parts of a whole learning culture, so that at times they mentioned one or more traits of TCCL in the same discourse or even the same utterance.

The exam as an unescapable part and the ultimate goal of the Chinese education system was alluded to by all seven focal participants: Chu, Ping, Qi, Shen, Sun, Tang and Wei. Shen even called it “a burden”. However, the harshest lines on the examination system leading to the *Gaokao* were etched by Sun who reflected in her diary on its seemingly relentless demands on students:

At that time, we are forced to learn from morning until night. We have no weekends, few holidays, very little spare time so we can't do what we like. We have no choice to control our life. How I wished we could be free then!  
(Sun\_D)

In this portrait of an exam-driven culture, Sun also depicted the lack of autonomy, another oft-cited trait of TCCL learners. And how does this learning culture affect their EFL development? As Sun perceived it, Chinese students lack practice because English is learnt as a subject – “it is like knowledge.” Thus, “learning English well in . . . China is not an easy thing” (Sun\_F) as the language is seldom used after class. Hence, it appears that the mastery of English as knowledge is another feature of the TCCL in this picture presented by Sun.

The difficulty of learning English well and the emphasis placed on the mastery of knowledge, especially grammar, appeared to have also troubled Chu. In her diary, she postulated:

It seems to me that the root of our Chinese students always learning “deaf English” is that we put too much emphasize on the grammar. Whenever we

are speaking, we are thinking about the grammar which definitely slows the speed. A more serious consequence is the losing of confidence.

(Chu\_D)

It seemed to Chu that the emphasis on grammar has an adverse effect on Chinese students. Further, she attempted to account for the shyness among PRC classmates to speak English in public: “It’s only when teachers ask you to answer questions you will speak in English. Except that you don’t have chance to speak” (Chu\_F). Her explanation here appears to underline the authority of teachers and the seeming passivity of students, as well as the limited opportunities for practice and interaction in her EFL classes. All three characteristics are often depicted as part of the TCCL in the literature.

The emphasis on grammar in his English classes also surfaced as a theme in Shen’s face-to-face interview. He had this to say: “Teachers just emphasize . . . the grammar part. . . . (*Because the classes are very large?*) Yeah, but if it’s a small class they won’t do any change to their teaching style. Because the exam is a burden to the high school students” (Shen\_F). In his responses to the interview, Shen also highlighted a few other TCCL characteristics: teacher as authority, the transmission teaching methods and exam-driven learning/teaching. In passing, he also mentioned the learning situation of large classes (of 60 students on average), which can limit practice and interaction.

Another learner, Wei, echoed Shen on the emphasis of grammar and the exam-driven learning culture in his own experience. In addition, he mentioned the emphasis on vocabulary and limited opportunities for speaking. The limitation might have been the result of large classes and the transmission methodology so that learning was effected through the imitation model: “our emphasise just in learning new words, grammars and to pass the exam. Hmm . . . we have few chance to speak” (Wei\_F).

The characteristics of teacher as authority and the imitation model of learning were likewise highlighted by Tang. During junior middle school, Tang readily embraced the reciting and memorisation of texts prescribed by his teacher. He wrote in his diary: “my English teacher asked us to recite every article from textbook and she would check during reading class every morning. . . . Reciting contributed greatly to my progress” (Tang\_D). Tang’s reflection introduces the belief in effort for achievement as well as emphasis on learning from texts and mastery of knowledge. When he was in the BC, however, Tang could stand back and comment on the exam-driven system that the learning context in China was “more focused on grammar, reading, and it’s aimed for exams” (Tang\_F).

The themes of teacher as authority and the emphasis on vocabulary also surfaced in the diary of Ping who recalled the memorisation of teacher assigned vocabulary lists: “We depended a lot on humdrum memory in China. All the things we were supposed to do are to memorize everything the teacher assigned. A list of new

vocabulary would be waiting for us all the time” (Ping\_D). In addition, he commented in the face-to-face interview on the exam-driven system, as well as the disparity between the mastery of knowledge and the application of that knowledge, such that many PRC students “know a lot of vocabulary . . . pass a lot of exams but they don’t know how to use English” (Ping\_F).

The mastery of knowledge and teacher as authority in the TCCL were also themes in Qi’s diary and interviews. He detailed various learning methods prescribed by his teachers which included transcription and reading aloud, largely imitation models of learning (Qi\_D). In addition, he highlighted the micro issue of direct word-for-word translation and the macro issue of an exam-driven education system (which was fueled by the goal of university admission). Like Ping, he concluded that although these students worked hard on exercises assigned by their teachers, they “never enter the door of learning English” (Qi\_F). This comment pointed to the TCCL trait of strong belief in effort for achievement but also implied Qi’s criticism of Chinese English Language Teaching (ELT).

The above series of pictures painted by the seven Chinese students of their learning experiences in China do resemble the portrayal of the TCCL learning and teaching context in the literature: exam-driven teaching/learning; the lack of autonomy, and passivity on the part of learners; the transmission and imitation models of teaching/learning; the teacher as authority and model; emphasis on the mastery of textual knowledge, grammar and vocabulary; strong belief in effort for achievement; large classes and the lack of individual practice. Thus, although the Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) scene has been developing over the past few decades, the influence of the TCCL still seems pervasive.

### 2.3 TCCL as embodied by the focal participants

The seven focal participants’ reflections on their Chinese EFL context converged with one another’s and their comments indicated that TCCL as portrayed in the literature had significant influence on their learning journeys. However, whether the learners themselves were embodiments of the influence of the TCCL, that is, whether they can be described as TCCL learners, is a different issue. As the following three sub-sections will illustrate, the data do indicate commonalities among the participants, particularly in three learner characteristics, namely, the centrality of vocabulary learning, the belief in effort and the active, even proactive, stance they adopted towards their learning. While the first two findings are in keeping with the literature on Chinese students, the last trait is quite different from the picture of the “typical” passive learner. The participants thus exhibited both TCCL and non-TCCL characteristics; moreover, some of them appeared to have displayed the latter even while they were in China.

### 2.3.1 *The importance of vocabulary*

Vocabulary was never far from the minds of the seven focal participants. Wei said little about vocabulary learning in his diary, but in the face-to-face interview, he expressed regret that he had not “learnt much words, new words actually” in the BC compared to his schooldays in China: “Ya, we should learn new words. Spoken, listening is good but more new words may be even better” (Wei\_F). In contrast to Wei’s lament, Qi was elated that he “learned many vocabularies” during the BC (Qi\_E). Yet, it was clear that, for both Wei and Qi, the learning of new vocabulary was significant in their belief system. Ping apparently shared the same belief about the importance of vocabulary when he lamented early in the BC: “My vocabulary is limited” (Ping\_D). At the end of his degree programme, his concern with vocabulary recurred in his advice to an imaginary freshman: he or she should “always be ready to take long and strange words” (Ping\_E). Chu was delighted that her reading of the Harry Potter series gave her “a lot of new words”; yet she regretted that she “read very fast and neglected a lot of new words” (Chu\_D). In the email interview, she used vocabulary as one criterion for measuring success in her learning journey. The oral report during the BC was helpful as she “learned many English phrases” (Chu\_E). Tang also revealed his concern with vocabulary when he evaluated the debates that was part of the BC curriculum as providing an avenue to learn more: “I thought I can at least learn many vocabularies relating to the motions” (Tang\_D).

The two remaining participants, Shen and Sun did not only mention or imply that vocabulary was important for the learning of English but also emphasised the memorising of vocabulary. Shen reflected in his diary that he had “tried [his] best to remember new words” since junior middle school. During the BC, he learnt many new words “using half an hour in the morning to remember them” (Shen\_D). However, he also stressed the need to use the new words learnt in reading and writing to practice, “rather than simple memorizing” (Shen\_E). Sun stressed the need to memorise vocabulary but took it beyond simple memorisation to meaningful expression: “Only those words who have rooted in you mind can appear when you are thinking, and try to express you opinion” (Sun\_D). She probably exemplified the Confucian scholar who practises “deep learning” as suggested by Biggs (1996) and Gu (2003). In the email interview, her emphasis was still on vocabulary expansion which was greatly helped by her Undergraduate Degree Programme (UDP). Referring to her degree major, Quantitative Finance, she reflected: “It broadens my vocabulary, enriches the accuracy and contents of my expression” (Sun\_E). In addition to Shen and Sun, Chu was very proactive in the way she went about expanding her vocabulary in English. I have described her concern for vocabulary in the previous paragraph, but she deserves mention here for her traditional as well as high-tech ways to memorise and review words. She not only read print materials but also took advantage of computer software, radio broadcasts, recordings and MP3 sound tracks. She left no stone unturned in her efforts to aid her memory and recall (Chu\_F).

### 2.3.2 *The belief in effort for achievement*

Chu was outstanding not only in her efforts in vocabulary learning but also in other aspects and skills. She was the determined strategist who worked hard to advance as quickly as she could in her transitions from EFL to ESL/EIL. Why did she put in all this effort? She apparently embraced the belief that effort is necessary for achievement:

hard work definitely will help you. Because for language, it's not a matter of how smart you are. Not like the maths problems. . . . But for English . . . for example, if you read a sentence for a hundred times, of course you will remember it.

(Chu\_F)

Although Chu was not the only participant who was influenced by a strong belief in effort for achievement, she was probably the one who acted on it most consistently.

Sun also maintained her emphasis on effort for mastery through repeated practice. She commented thus in the email interview: “English is totally a foreign language for me before the bridging course. After it, I get used to it already. The courses and my own practices help me to achieve it” (Sun\_E). Besides indicating her transition from being an EFL to an ESL learner, this remark underlines Sun’s belief in effort for achievement, one of the TCCL values depicted in the literature. In her advice to an imaginary Chinese freshman, she demonstrated how deeply she believed in this value: “Make better use of your bridging course time. You shall be self-disciplined and give yourself more pressure even though there’s not many serious tests within the bridging course” (Sun\_E).

Effort was paramount to achievement for Shen too, who believed that mastery of vocabulary was only possible after long, repeated practice. He started memorising vocabulary from two dictionaries (for CET4 and CET6) from high school and read ten pages each week. When he joined the BC, he started to read ten pages each day within half an hour to one hour before class. By the middle of the six-month BC course, he had “mastered most words for level 6 already, and started to do the same thing for TOEFL vocabulary” (Shen\_E). Such dedication is astounding and can only be the result of strong belief in the value of effort for attaining his ideal L2 self.

### 2.3.3 *The active stance*

The above findings appear to confirm the plausibility of the “TCCL learner” as described in literature: the emphasis by these learners on the mastery of vocabulary through memorisation and the important role of effort for achievement. However, the latter characteristic also shows up “the other side of the coin”. The participants were all active and even proactive learners in contrast to the passive learner depicted in literature on the TCCL. We have seen in Sub-section 2.3.2

how Chu, Sun and Shen determinedly push ahead in their learning journeys. The same was largely true of the other participants, Wei, Ping, Qi and Tang, although in varying degrees and less dramatic fashion. The following examples will illustrate the proactive initiative they took to facilitate their transition to their new learning context.

Wei read “a lot of novels” in the Self English Learning Facility (SELF) in the Centre for English Language Communication (CELC) during the BC, “forced” himself to use English during his UDP, immersed himself in “the US educational culture” during his Student Exchange Programme (SEP) and “said a lot” in English to his German supervisor during his Final Year Project (FYP) (Wei\_E). Ping constantly reflected on the task demands of the BC activities and took an active part in the intra- and inter-class debates. During his UDP, he faithfully wrote up the many laboratory reports required and “accumulated” his learning “everyday with anyone”. In the exit interview, he anticipated his need for “more professional writing” (Ping\_F). Qi hardly mentioned the BC in his diary but did reveal once that he was “trying to persuade [him]self to make full use of every opportunity to practise [his] spoken English” (Qi\_D). While in his UDP, he interacted in English with other international students who were fellow residents at his student hall and did the same with contractors and vendors during his Internship Programme (IP) (Qi\_E). As for Tang, he was active in managing his learning, and was constantly in search of new strategies during the BC, for example, reading books, using the Internet and taking part in debates. As a Physics major, he did “intense reading” on the history and philosophy of Science and “could really feel the improvement of [his] English language”. During his SEP in the United States, he “took the challenge to give a presentation to a class of Americans in a seminar course”. To overcome his nervousness, he “spent days to do rehearsal”. When choosing his FYP, he took care that he “should not end up practicing Chinese with people”. So he chose a German professor as supervisor and insisted on speaking English to his team members in the project (Tang\_A).

Thus, we see how all the focal participants are essentially active learners who do not conform to the image of the passive TCCL learner lacking in autonomy. Even more unexpectedly, there is yet another way in which these students demonstrated that they were not passive learners: they did not refrain from voicing their critique, whether of their curricula or of authority, when they deemed it necessary. I have quoted Shen’s views on the TCCL context in Sub-section 2.2: he believed that because of the emphasis on exams, Chinese teachers would not change their teaching style. Another participant, Ping, was candid about his unhappiness with the TCCL’s emphasis on memorisation of vocabulary: “I do not like to learn this way” (Ping\_D). During the BC, he was reluctant to accept the unfavourable evaluation of his essay by his tutor even after she had “explained it again and again” (Ping\_D). Qi, while in senior middle school, rejected his English teacher’s pedagogy because it contradicted his beliefs about language learning. He also critiqued the Chinese ELT situation, that Chinese students may work hard following the methods or modelling of their teachers, but they “never enter the door of learning English”

(Qi\_F). Tang was uncharacteristically frank in his comments on the ineffective English communication of some of his UDP lecturers originally from China: “their oral English is not good actually, and it does cause some problems to us, both Singaporean and the Chinese students” (Tang\_F). His analytical reflections on motivation and fossilisation in language learning also prove him to be far from passive (Tang\_E). It is possible that, like Tang, many quiet students portrayed as passive learners in TCCL literature actually have very active minds and only need the right activity to unleash their motivation to participate in class, just as Ping and Tang did during the debates.

I will underscore this finding on the active and even proactive stance of the focal participants with the examples of the two most forthright learners. Chu’s comments early in the BC show an outspokenness not characteristic of TCCL learners, especially one who had just arrived in a new learning context. Some of these comments, included in her diary entry 2, constituted a somewhat direct critique of the BC when she compared it unfavourably to the New Oriental School (NOS). Chu described it as “a famous English training school in China” where she felt “full of confidence due to the rapid progress in English, thus finding great fun in learning English”. She followed this comment with: “Sometimes I miss the New Oriental from the bottom of my heart. I have to say sincerely that sometimes I feel boring because of the slow pace of the [bridging] course and the tiny progress in English” (Chu\_D). Early in the BC too, Sun’s confident suggestion to improve the course was also quite unexpected: “I think another activity should be added is reading aloud or reciting” (Sun\_D). She supported her suggestion with reasons based on her EFL experience in China. In her last diary entry, she was rather frank about her dissatisfaction with the BC: “Our bridging course . . . is dragging on. . . . We don’t have such an important examination to drive us to study hard. . . . Idle life can make us confused” (Sun\_D). Her evaluation remained the same in the email interview:

As to the bridging course, I think the class can be carried out in a more serious manner such that our potential can be better activated. . . . The bridging course is really too relaxing compared with the university. I think lots of us experienced a swift and big transition.

(Sun\_E)

Her critique of the BC was not typical of the demeanour of the TCCL learner portrayed in the literature: passive and deferential to authority.

In summary, we see the seven participants, exemplifying both TCCL and non-TCCL characteristics, the latter having being developed even while the learners were still in China. Socialised early into their native learning culture, it is not surprising that they emphasised the mastery of knowledge, especially in the memorisation of vocabulary. The strong belief in effort for achievement was also a common trait among them. However, the active and even proactive approach they adopted towards their learning, the curriculum and authority does not match the portrait of the typically passive TCCL learner.



## 2.4 Discussion

The findings presented in this chapter indicate that culture is foundational although it cannot account for all the learner characteristics of the Chinese students. In their diaries, face-to-face and email interviews, and the sole autobiography, the seven focal participants attested to and displayed *some* characteristics described in the TCCL. However, these PRC learners also embraced and embodied some characteristics unlike those associated with the Chinese culture of learning. They showed themselves to be active learners deeply involved in their English learning. Their emphasis on the need to increase effort for achievement and to expand vocabulary for proficiency was not mere lip service. They actually took active, even proactive, steps in their quests to improve their English proficiency. By their own preferred approach and strategy, they adapted and developed from EFL students to ESL and EIL learners in the process. In all, they reminded me of ducks paddling furiously beneath the water while they seem to glide effortlessly on its surface.

In my findings above, I find a parallel in Shi's 2006 questionnaire study of 400 Shanghai junior and senior middle school students. The results debunked the view that Chinese students are passive, submissive or lacking in critical thinking. However, the data also yielded "old" learner beliefs depicted in previous studies on the TCCL: exams remain the paramount motivation for studying English; good teachers should be knowledgeable and help students pass exams; good students should be characterised by perseverance and diligence. Thus, the data on both TCCL and non-TCCL characteristics sketch a "mixed" picture of Chinese learners.

What could account for the seven participants' mixed picture of TCCL and non-TCCL learner characteristics? There could be two possible main factors. First, Chu, Ping, Qi, Shen, Sun, Tang and Wei were all "products" of their situated historical and cultural contexts. Their learner characteristics had been shaped by the Chinese culture of learning as they progressed through the school system. Thus, they carried the imprint of the TCCL such as the emphases on vocabulary learning and effort for achievement. On the other hand, there was reflection and deep learning going on (Biggs, 1996) so that they evaluated the TCCL and at times chose other ways of learning alongside their conformity to the prevailing learning culture. Second, being in a new, ESL/EIL learning context in NUS, they became increasingly exposed to different learning cultures and were prompted to explore other ways of learning. For example, Sun embarked on learning English and content together and sought opportunities to practise speaking with "strangers" in the NUS community (Sun\_D). Tang immersed himself in literature on the philosophy and history of science, which led him to "naturally think in English" (Tang\_E).

Next, what explains the participants' openness in their diaries, interviews and autobiography? There could be two possible reasons. First, they were given the opportunity to voice their thoughts which they had never been given in their

previous context, probably due to the large classes, strict hierarchy and exam-oriented learning culture. This possibility may be inferred from Wei's enthusiastic response during his face-to-face interview: "we have few chances to speak . . . but here in NUS, we have more chances to speak, to our teachers, our friends, and so it's very good" (Wei\_F). Second, the participants were candid in expressing their reflections and opinions probably because of the positive teacher-student relationship they shared with me. They might have felt reassured that I understood them, from our prior interactions, so that they could be frank about their reflections and opinions. I recall the surprise of one of my doctorate supervisors when she read excerpts of the diaries; she found that the participants were very open with me. The two possible reasons described above may have implications for pedagogy: we need to create opportunities for students to reflect on and express their learning experiences; and it is possible to encourage students to be candid by fostering an affirming teacher-student relationship.

If these learners from a TCCL context were already active learners at the beginning of the BC and even while they were in their home learning context, what were they like by the time they graduated from their UDP? In his email interview, Qi summarised what might be a typical transition for these students: "The change over these years is confidence" (Qi\_E). Their beliefs about learning a language had evolved beyond the TCCL concerns with vocabulary and grammar to a broader view of the purpose of communication for which confidence is an important component.

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# 3

## THE NUS LEARNING CONTEXT

### Opportunities and empowerment

#### 3.1 The NUS learning context

In the previous chapter, we examined the traditional Chinese culture of learning (TCCL) context that the seven focal participants hailed from and the common learner characteristics that they embodied. Let us now focus on their new learning context after they arrived in Singapore and in the National University of Singapore (NUS). This new learning context can be divided into two periods: pre-and post-matriculation. During the former, these learners were enrolled in the Intensive English Course for People's Republic of China (PRC) Senior Middle 3 (SM3) students, often referred to as the SM3 Bridging Course (BC). After they had completed the BC, they matriculated as full-time NUS students, joining various faculties or schools, chiefly, the Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Science and the School of Computing. In turn, the influence of each period had on the learning journeys of the seven focal participants can be further divided into the impact from the curriculum and the impact from the community. In the chapter, I present the findings of my study on the influence of each segment of the NUS learning context on these participants and the transitions they made as a result.

#### 3.2 Pre-matriculation: BC

##### 3.2.1 *Curriculum*

The seven young people were clear-eyed about and open to sharing their perspectives on the impact of the BC's curriculum on their learning journey. Most of them were positive about the value and purpose of the BC, and able to see the connection between the curriculum and their improved proficiency in all or most of the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Improved speaking was singled out most

often as the greatest gain from the BC, and the course activities were considered the most useful means which helped them achieve those gains. Let us hear what they themselves testified to concerning the impact of the BC curriculum. (For an overview of the BC curriculum, see Appendix D: The Bridging Course.)

To begin with, the participants understood the purpose and value in the BC. In their email interviews, both Shen and Tang commented on this aspect of the BC. For Shen, the purpose of the BC is to prepare Chinese students for academic life in an English-medium university; thus, he suggested that the BC encourages learners to set their own targets and then work towards them. As for Tang, the BC challenged him and motivated him to take the initiative and make the effort for progress: “Just like what Confucius said, ‘Teachers open the door, but you have to enter by yourself’” (Tang\_E). Thus, the BC was seen as having the value of motivating Chinese students in their English learning journey.

Moreover, all the participants developed greater competence and confidence in their listening, reading, speaking and writing skills through the activities and tasks of the BC’s curriculum. The most frequently reported improvements were in speaking so let us begin with the students who highlighted their enhanced speaking skills: Ping, Chu and Tang. Ping found the activities of the BC most helpful for him, especially the intra- and inter-class debates; up till then, he had never thought he would speak English in public. Even his mother was surprised:

before that, I never think I would speak in front of so many people. I joined the debate and my mother was surprised. She said, “Oh, you took part in the debate?” Because I like to keep quiet or only speak when necessary.

(Ping\_F)

Chu had many chances to speak “in front of the whole class” for her weekly oral report; that was the most helpful activity for her as it built her confidence and courage (Chu\_E). She then built on this foundation when the class had “two heated debates”, she being a member of her BC group’s debate team. She reported that all the debaters “argued fluently and actively” (Chu\_D). Another student, Tang, contrasted the BC with the Chinese English Language Teaching (ELT) context he left behind, and evaluated the BC as “more focused on oral English and there’s no big pressure from exams” (Tang\_F). He also found the activities most motivating and helpful, especially the debates, and reported that he felt “motivated to refute his opponent” (Tang\_E). Thus, the new learning context and the BC curriculum provided the opportunity and motivation for Tang, usually reticent, to explore new activities and to extend his strategies for speaking.

Other students commented on the development of skills besides those of speaking during the BC. For Qi, he perceived gains in both speaking and writing as well as in his vocabulary. During the face-to-face interview six months after completing the BC, he said, “I think the course helps most is the spoken English and the activities. It is very interesting. . . . It’s quite useful I think, to write essays, so although I

spent a lot of time on it. . . . [I]t's worth it" (Qi\_F). Qi also reported that the research project helped him made the crossing into authentic use of English, while he found the oral report the most challenging task.

In terms of listening, Shen and Sun reported on definite improvement. Shen reflected that his listening proficiency had been heightened, as measured by his ability to follow a movie: "I think I have progressed a lot since I come into NUS. Now I can get most of the lines in some movies, but still not all the lines" (Shen\_D). Sun mentioned that listening was her greatest gain during the BC while oral report was her greatest challenge. The BC provided the basis for her transition from English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as an International Language (EIL); it was easier to learn English well in NUS due to the opportunities for interaction in the language on a daily basis. Besides improvements in listening, writing and speaking skills, she learnt more about Western cultures (Sun\_F).

While Wei valued the "chance to communicate" created by the activities, debates and learning journeys (excursions) of the BC, he also highlighted the opportunity for reading provided by the BC. The autonomy offered by the Self English Learning Facility (SELF) at the Centre for English Language Communication (CELC) was a great motivator for his independent language development:

Yes, I think the most . . . useful one may be the activities . . . debate, and learning tour outside, it's very good. . . . We have more chance to communicate. . . . But I often go to the CELC to read the books. . . . I can choose what I like [,] what I dislike.

(Wei\_F)

With regard to the materials of the BC, Wei and Shen interestingly gave quite opposite views. For the former, he said, "Material – there are always many materials they are giving us . . . not very good I think. . . . I don't like to read it. I don't know how to say, but I just not like it" (Wei\_F). On the other hand, Shen's response was very positive; while he found the activities "make [him] feel quite happy", the materials were "fun . . . a lot of information". He contrasted them with the textbooks used in his high school in China: they were "old style" and "because we need to prepare for exams" (Shen\_F).

Hence, it is probably safe to conclude that all the participants benefited from the BC in terms of their English proficiency, their first stop in the new NUS learning context, although they varied in their emphasis on the different skills. The transition in terms of their competence and confidence in English learning was also quite apparent from the data they provided.

Besides the curricular aspects of the BC, did the pedagogical and relational dimensions of the BC impact the learners? Did the relationships with teachers and among learners themselves influence the participants' learning journeys? The reflections and responses on these aspects were generally positive. Sun particularly relished the atmosphere of her BC class: "My bridging course is interesting,

21 youths seated together, discussing, chatting, laughing . . . and we cooperate with each other harmoniously” (Sun\_D). As for the teacher–student relationship in the BC, the learners emphasised different aspects of this relationship. Ping’s response was on teaching style and teacher expectations. He was “[t]aught in a [natural] style” such that he was “really learning and using a language” (Ping\_D). In the second half of the BC, he perceived that his tutors had raised their expectations and thus the task demands were more rigorous. Qi saw the teachers as nurturing individuals who encouraged them to speak up in class with exhortations such as “don’t be shy” (Qi\_F). Tang also mentioned that the teachers encouraged the students to speak. “They speak to us in English and encourage conversation among students in English” (Tang\_F). Wei saw the teachers as advisors and facilitators: “all my teachers are very helpful, especially, when we do the [research] project. My teacher has given us many advice and helped us to revise each, many times. Teachers are good” (Wei\_F).

Thus, teachers in the BC were perceived as helpful by these learners: teaching/leading by example, setting standards, encouraging, advising and guiding. This picture is in contrast to the one the participants painted of the TCCL classroom. There, teachers are the authority who assign vocabulary lists for memorisation, prescribe the methods of reciting/transcribing texts or emphasise the mastery of knowledge for exams. The participants thus experienced a transition in pedagogy as well as relationship in the BC learning context. They seemed to have made that transition quite smoothly as none of them commented on the change in a negative way.

However, not all was rosy. There were also comments on some negative aspects of the learning context of the BC as perceived by Chu and Sun. Chu compared the BC unfavourably to New Oriental School (NOS), China’s famous private language school. Early in the BC, she reflected on her boredom due to “the slow pace of the course and the tiny progress in English”. She elaborated: “Small class has its advantages, especially for practicing oral English . . . but there still can be some improvements” (Chu\_D). Compared to her EFL experience in China, the BC had less emphasis on dictation and less rigour in reading practice. Sun also seemed to lament the monotony of BC; there was a sense of stagnation: “I just found I hadn’t learnt anything useful.” She felt the BC was “dragging on”; there was also no “clear goal” and no “important examination” as a driving force for Sun. Mental inertia had set in due to the lack of challenge: “Idle life can make us confused” (Sun\_D). Thus, for these two learners, the transition was perceived as one from a more demanding learning context to a less rigorous one, and hence a regression in their learning journey. Happily, they appeared to recover from this initial learning and culture shock later in their NUS sojourn. Towards the end of the BC, Sun found it “fun to make friends with so many lively words” and learning English became “a magic game” (Sun\_D). However, it should be noted that the findings reported in this sub-section are based on only two participants and may not be representative of the experiences of Chinese students in general.

### 3.2.2 Community

While the first six months of their time in Singapore and NUS was taken up mainly by attending the BC five days a week, the PRC students did have some opportunity to interact with the larger NUS and Singapore communities. Broadly speaking, there were two responses to this opportunity.

On the one hand, Shen relished the NUS environment “because all around is English” (Shen\_F). Sun also wrote with palpable delight that she was in “a country whose formal language is English where almost anything written down is in English”, so she wanted to be “careful and pay attention” so as to “learn more and live better” (Sun\_D).

On the other hand, Chu reported that the sociolinguistic context of the community thwarted her efforts to practise speaking English. “It must be the most frustrating thing to find that the locals can easily know English is not my mother tongue the moment I speak one English word!” (Chu\_D). She knew because people often replied her in Chinese. Tang had a similar experience when many local people spoke Chinese to him.

I generally thought that after 6 months of training I would talk to Singaporean in English freely. . . . Perhaps, it is partly because Singapore is not totally a English speaking country. When I went to computer center and asked staff for help, I spoke English, yet they replied me in Chinese. The same thing happened in bookstore.

(Tang\_D)

It was a challenge for Chu and Tang to speak English within the NUS and local communities; they often felt much hindered in their attempts. Thus, some of the participants experienced and benefited from the transition to Singapore where English is spoken along with other languages. On the other hand, others felt that they did not receive adequate support from the sociolinguistic environment, and their transition was a problematic one. It is possible that, in general, Chinese learners have both kinds of experiences in their interaction with the NUS and local communities as reported by the four participants here. However, these experiences occurred during their first six months in NUS and Singapore while they were enrolled in the BC. As we will see in Section 3.3, the Chinese students experienced greater transitions in terms of their interactions with the communities after they had matriculated in their respective Undergraduate Degree Programme (UDP).

## 3.3 Post-matriculation: UDP

### 3.3.1 Curriculum

After they completed the BC, the PRC scholars matriculated as NUS students. For these freshmen, that was initiation into academic life in the university where students, under the tutelage of the faculty, regularly plunge into a very rigorous



curriculum, completing an average of five modules in twelve to thirteen weeks each semester. Along the way, readings, discussions, seminars, presentations, lab(oratory) reports, essays, project reports, mid-term tests, and other assignments are required, culminating in the final examination papers, to ensure that the set standards have been met. Co-curricular activities (CCA) under the auspices of the clubs, societies and student halls are also part of the overall experience of NUS students.

How did the seven focal participants navigate their individual learning journeys through this huge machinery of lectures, tutorials, workshops, seminars and fulfil the assignments, tests and examinations required of them, which were all conducted in English? How did they survive this second phase of their ESL and EIL context? Happily, the data indicate that they fulfilled the requirements amply and, in fact, emerged from their four-year UDP all the more vital in their English skills. They had advanced well during their English learning journey and made various transitions as can be seen from their reflections and comments in the diary, interviews and autobiography.

Some of these comments were brief but nonetheless indicated the overall impact of the UDP on the participants. In his characteristically direct and terse manner, Ping wrote, “Lab reports, a lot” in response to the email interview question, “What did you find most helpful in your degree programme?” (Ping\_E). As a Computational Biology major, completing the many laboratory reports he had to submit had provided regular practice for his written English. Almost as brief was Qi’s comment: “The writing skill and reading skill” (Qi\_E). Thus, we can surmise that the regular reading and writing they had to do in their UDP helped them improve their English skills.

Reading scientific writing in his UDP likewise proved to be the bridge to greater English proficiency for Tang. His passion in Physics provided the impetus to read voraciously:

As a physics student, I am not simply a fan of equations. I do philosophy and study the history of science in attempt to discover the secret of universe. And that motivated me to read a lot of philosophy and history books. And in the period of intense reading, I could really feel the improvement of my English language.

(Tang\_E)

Moreover, he confessed that he spent an “awesome amount of time in English”. What was his motivation and purpose? “There is no such things like translation when I do physics. In fact, I have trouble to talk physics in Chinese.” He summed up the progress in his proficiency thus: “Now I am proficient in English reading and listening and even naturally think in English” (Tang\_E). As we will learn in another chapter, Tang not only thought *in* English, but he also thought *about* English learning.

Besides Ping, another Computational Biology major, Chu, also found the UDP context helpful in developing her writing skills in English. Her opportunities to

write regularly came in the forms of reports and essays. In fact, she had a difficult time initially: “I really got a very low mark on my lab report, because my teacher said ‘Wah, this is not what we call lab report.’” However, she was able to “learn the ropes” of this genre and did well enough eventually to enter a postgraduate degree programme. Beyond writing, Chu found that her listening and speaking skills improved through regular interaction with lecturers as well as local and international fellow students: “Forced to speak . . . so improved a lot” (Chu\_F). In her classes, she also observed that her fellow students dared to ask questions, a trait she desired to develop for herself. As she advanced to the upper years, she met with professors and laboratory mates to discuss problems and present results (Chu\_E). So she could regularly practise her listening and speaking skills, in contrast to her experience of limited speaking opportunities with the community during the BC.

The improvement in speaking skills as a result of the UDP was highlighted by another student Wei in the course of the email interview.

My English, especially spoken English, was terrible as I first enrolled in NUS. . . . Now, I cannot say that I am good at English, but at least there’s no problem to communicate with original [native] English speakers. During the four years in NUS, my English has improved greatly. . . . I still remember the very first oral report, it was a disaster and a shame. Now, I am very confident to make any speech, especially academic ones.

(Wei\_E)

When I probed him on the process that led to this outcome, he responded: “There are a lot of presentations, projects, thesis to be done. You use English all the time and you must use it. I mean gradually, you will gain confidence and your English has improved without you noticing it.” However, Wei also revisited reading as a significant contributor to his transition to greater proficiency and confidence: “I began to like reading English books that time [BC].” In his advice to an imaginary junior student he wrote: “Use your time in bridging course to read more and more books. . . . I mean all kinds of books, not just those related to your major” (Wei\_E). Four years before, in his diary and the face-to-face interview, he had highlighted the role of reading in his learning journey. Apparently, reading in and outside of the curriculum had helped Wei to advance in his English learning journey.

An even more comprehensive improvement that included reading, writing, speaking and vocabulary skills was reported by Sun. In the email interview, she responded that her UDP was most helpful in giving her opportunities for practice. The significant experiences that helped her most were exposure to and use of academic English daily: “I learned lots of very practical modules. . . . My major of Quantitative Finance is a very comprehensive and profound major covering math, programming and finance.” Elaborating, she explained that her UDP broadened her vocabulary, and enriched the accuracy and contents of her expression. Finance modules were “language enriched” as they involved much reading, writing and speaking (Sun\_E).

The importance of the UDP curriculum in helping the seven focal participants develop greater proficiency and confidence in their English skills may be summed up by Shen's comments on this aspect. His responses to my questions (given in parentheses and italics) during the face-to-face interview underlined the role played by the NUS context in the learners' transition to greater familiarity with and proficiency in English:

I now listen in English, read in English, write in English. Except not speak in English. . . . (*So do you think the NUS environment actually helped you?*) Yeah, yeah I think so, because er . . . how to say, ya, of course, because all around is English. (*Okay, so the environment is important. . . . So you think if you were in China, things would be different?*) Ya, would be totally different.

(Shen\_F)

So it appears that the NUS ESL/EIL context had contributed to the English learning journey of Shen and his fellow PRC learners. They had taken "the road less travelled" compared with their peers who remained in Chinese universities. As reflected in their foregoing comments, the UDP had helped the seven focal participants experience a positive transition in their competence and confidence as English learners.

### *Student Exchange Programme (SEP) and Internship Programme (IP)*

Like many globalised universities, NUS offers a SEP as part of its curriculum, and students can apply to spend up to two semesters in a partner university. Three of the seven participants embarked on this programme: Chu, Wei and Tang who were all Faculty of Science students. Besides SEP, NUS offers another programme that provides its students with learning experiences outside the university and that is the IP. Students may apply to be attached to a local or overseas company or organisation for usually one semester to gain industrial experience. Qi, a Faculty of Engineering student, went on an internship. On the whole, the SEP and IP had a positive effect on these learners' ESL/EIL learning experiences judging from their comments in the interviews and autobiography.

As she did for her UDP, Chu highlighted the enhancement of her speaking skills during her SEP experience: "With all native speakers around, I was forced to speak English more frequently and to be influenced by their accents and tones" (Chu\_E). The SEP moved her further along in her learning journey in giving her not only more opportunities to use English but also a greater sensitivity to the subtle nuances of tones and accents. This would have brought her closer to her Ideal L2 Self, one whose proficiency, especially in speaking, was close to that of the native speaker. There was thus a transition in Chu's readiness and sensitivity towards her communication in English.

Wei found his SEP experience a significant help to his English learning, his enthusiasm palpable through his email interview responses. He first expressed his

perception of the value of the programme: “exchanged to overseas, which is a perfect chance for us to practice our English”. In the following elaboration, the glowing descriptions (in italics, emphasis added) he used indicate the impact of the SEP on his learning journey:

I went to University of California, Santa Barbara at Sem II of third year for half a year. I was *totally immersed* in the US educational culture. It's *quite different* from that in Singapore or in China. For example, we have *a lot of time* to discuss with our classmates *inside and outside the lecture room*. We *even* have a weekly lunch time with our professor. In summary, it is *more free and open* there. In addition, I made *a lot of friends* both from US and other countries. You know, I had a *great* time with them and also learned *a lot* from them [emphasis added].

(Wei\_E)

This EIL experience appeared very helpful for Wei, academically, linguistically and socially. He seemed to have thrived in the openness and opportunities offered by the SEP segment of his UDP, reaching a new level in his competence and confidence in his English learning.

Tang's report of his SEP experience was painted in less glowing hues than Wei's. His evaluation was that he did not benefit linguistically from the programme at first, but it had a good effect afterwards: “SEP did not directly improve my English. Staying at the same level after completing SEP made me feel ashamed of myself and that motivates me to listen to English program and talk to English speaking people.” What is interesting about Tang's experience is his analysis of his SEP experience and related issues. He gave “the possible reason” why his English was not much improved after SEP: he spent most of his effort on his “research projects instead of local residents' daily life”. Even then, in contrast to Wei, he had rather limited interaction with faculty and peers involved in the research projects: “I communicated with faculty advisors but they were busy people. I got from them roughly one hour per week, which is plenty for science but not so adequate for language” (Tang\_E). However, it was not a lost cause, linguistically speaking, as he received helpful feedback that was quite similar to what aided Chu's greater sensitivity to accents and tones:

SEP does not disappoint me though. . . . I got the feedback that my accent went well with Singaporean but not Americans. It is important to have feedbacks. . . . The hard thing in learning foreign language is that we are not sensitive to fine details. . . . Two things, which sound alike to me, may be distinctly different to native speakers. SEP helped me to realize those details.

(Tang\_E)

This analysis shows Tang's growth in discerning the finer aspects of language learning. Nor did he stop at analysis, for he actually “took up the challenge to give a

presentation to a class of Americans in a seminar course” (Tang\_E). To overcome his nervousness, he spent days rehearsing, which indicates remarkable motivation and metacognition. In his own way, Tang developed greater sensitivity and motivation towards his English learning.

Let us now listen to Qi who went on the IP programme; his experience was not only positive but also transformative:

My internship helps me a lot. The job requires me to communicate with various vendors and contractors. At the beginning though I was not very confident to talk with them, I had to. After some time, I felt comfortable to talk to them and was able to communicate with them freely.

(Qi\_E)

The last word “freely” signifies much, given Qi’s initial diffidence in learning and using English during the BC. He had experienced a transition during the UDP, becoming more confident in speaking English in authentic communicative situations. This was a long way from his early comment four years before: “I speak when I have to speak” (Qi\_F). Overall, all the focal participants who were involved in the SEP or IP, an important phase of their UDP, benefited from their experiences and developed greater skills, sensitivity and confidence, albeit to different degrees.

### *Final Year Project (FYP)*

Some of the NUS faculties or schools implement the Final Year Project (FYP) as part of the curriculum for their undergraduate students. These students’ fulfilment of the FYP is a requirement for graduation and it also gives the undergraduates the opportunity to join a research project team supervised by a professor who is an expert in a particular field. The choice of the supervisor and the project team is therefore important for undergraduates, especially those who plan to take up post-graduate studies. The FYP may pave the way for them to be admitted to Master’s and PhD programmes if they show promise for research. Moreover, they could even continue in the same project under the same supervisor beyond their FYP. Both Wei and Tang referred to their FYP and their supervisors in their email interview responses. Interestingly, they were both Physics majors and both had supervisors originally from Germany.

The FYP had a profound and positive effect on Wei’s English learning journey as can be deduced from his enthusiastic reflections on his experience. Responding to the invitation to describe some significant experiences or people during this journey, he wrote: “My supervisor is German and I have to communicate with him in English all the time. He is very nice and can always forgive my bad English. I said a lot and My English has improved naturally” (Wei\_E). On my probing, Wei responded that he worked under the supervision of this professor for more than a year which was an extensive period of time. The professor’s kindness and openness empowered Wei such that he dared to speak “a lot” and it seemed only natural to

him that improvement followed. Thus, the FYP provided yet another enriching context for Wei's EIL development.

Tang seemed also to have benefited from his FYP experience although it was not explicitly stated. After his SEP experience when he felt he did not make commensurate progress in his English, he made a deliberate choice of his FYP supervisor and the project team as revealed in his autobiography. Not only that, but he also determined that he would speak in English to all team members even when they spoke in Chinese to him.

When choosing Final Year Project supervisor in NUS, I kept in mind that I should not end up practicing Chinese with people. I chose a professor from Germany, of whose group half do not speak Chinese. The other half, of course, spoke Chinese to me on welcoming me into the lab. But I insisted on speaking English and soon they accepted it. During my year long project, they bore with confusions resulted from my blurred English. And I am grateful to many corrections they made to my language.

(Tang\_A)

Such a concerted effort to ensure that he practised his speaking skills regularly was remarkable and showed Tang's motivation and initiative. It is probably true that Tang made progress in his EIL development during his FYP. Thus, this phase of the NUS learning context, where he decided to take charge of the language he would use for all interaction, helped Tang to make an important transition in agency and self-empowerment.

### 3.3.2 Community

How did the participants interact with the NUS and Singapore communities? Not as much was recorded of their social activities as it was for their academic ones. Nonetheless, two of them did mention the impact of their activities related to their residential halls, games and other CCAs. Chu described the local students in her residential hall as preferring to speak English although they could understand and speak Chinese. Thus, she "just ha[d] to speak English". There were also many exchange students in the hall, including those from Canada or America, and she could "only talk to them in English". She evaluated that as a good experience: "[A]t first I also a bit afraid they can't understand me but then they say okay it's good . . . because I speak slowly then they say it is ok, quite okay" (Chu\_F). That experience appeared to have been affirming for Chu and probably contributed to her continued development in ESL and EIL. Thus, being open to interaction in English with fellow hall residents of other nationalities had a positive effect on her proficiency and confidence.

The other learner who reported on the influence of his CCA was Qi. They provided him with another ESL and EIL context within NUS for interaction and communication, leading to growth in his beliefs, confidence and competence. He

“took up a lot of CCA during the first two years university life” in his hall: “I think this helped me a lot to make this change [in confidence] happen.” He spoke English when he played basketball in his residential hall where there were “a lot of foreigners”. However, Qi had a strong sense of Chinese cultural identity as revealed in his diary; thus, he also spent much time in CCA where Chinese was the natural choice for communication: “[B]ecause in *Xinqingrongji* [a campus Chinese song contest organised by students] we all speak Chinese. All the Malaysians, Singaporeans and Chinese they all speak Chinese” (Qi\_F). Thus, Qi managed to maintain his Chinese cultural identity while developing greater confidence in speaking English when engaged in different CCAs at his residential hall.

In summary, after spending nearly five years in NUS and experiencing its curriculum and community which together made up their learning context, the seven focal participants had all emerged further along in their individual learning journeys. While passing through the various portals that constituted the curriculum – BC, UDP, SEP, IP and FYP – and living as members of the NUS community with both local and international faculty and students, the participants had become more competent and confident as learners and users of English. Some, like Tang and Chu, had also developed greater sensitivity to the language and the nuances of accent and usage among other English speakers, growing in both their ESL and EIL experiences.

### 3.4 Discussion

The NUS context that the seven learners experienced, which was a combination of curriculum and community, had a significant and positive impact on their transition from EFL to ESL and EIL. The curriculum took the PRC students through the BC and UDP, which includes the SEP or the IP, and the FYP. They found themselves in diverse learning situations in which they had to use English with other users, comprising fellow students and faculty, both local and international ones. What is the advantage afforded to the participants by such a diversity, in curricular and linguistic terms? The answer is all these situations provided abundant opportunities for the Chinese students to practise their English. My study indicates that the learning context of the NUS curriculum can and does have an influence on the learning journeys of the Chinese BC students through the diversified opportunities provided so that they develop in their competence and confidence to varying degrees. Chu summed up her L2 experience in the NUS curriculum thus:

During the past five years, I have improved a lot in English, not just the vocabularies but also the confidence to speak out. I am not afraid of talking with English speakers and instead I feel I enjoy doing so. I had opportunity to speak English everyday. Practice makes progress. I am glad that my writing skills improved significantly as well. Probably I should be thankful of all the reports and essays I have written in the past five years.

(Chu\_E)

Besides the academic context, each phase of the curriculum also means a new community, whether it is a hall of residence, student exchange partner university, project group or internship host organisation or clients. As a student in an NUS resident hall, Qi found that he had to speak English when he played basketball with his fellow residential hall residents as many of them were also international students. It was a similar experience for Chu who had to interact with both the local and other international students in English. During their SEP, Wei made friends with fellow students from the United States and other countries, while Tang received helpful feedback from others on his accent.

The seven participants were thus immersed in the NUS curriculum and related communities in every phase of their sojourn and provided with the opportunities to move from EFL to ESL and EIL. But was that a sufficient condition for the transitions in their learning journey? I would argue that without their interlocutors' willingness to engage with the Chinese students, they would not have made as much progress as they had demonstrated. We need only to think of the narratives of the five migrant women in Norton's (2000) study to see the contrast. The Chinese students in my study had been empowered to interact as equals among their peers, and even their professors, who could have acted like their social and academic "superiors", were very accommodating and helped them along the way. Wei commented that his German FYP could "forgive" his "poor English", which encouraged Wei to speak freely and find improvement. Thus, empowerment by the host community seems to be a necessary condition to help these Chinese learners make successful transitions in their learning journey.

Can empowerment by others explain all that the participants had achieved? I would think not; I see evidence of these students empowering themselves to manage their journeys. Shen advised an imaginary junior to communicate more with professors and peers outside of class. Tang deliberately chose a non-Chinese supervisor for his FYP and insisted on speaking only English to his teammates. Ping took part in the public debates despite his usual reticence, while Sun resolved to pay careful attention so as to enhance her learning. Thus, while the Chinese students were empowered by others, they also empowered themselves.

We can thus draw implications that a learning context's curriculum and community can together provide diversified and rich opportunities for Chinese students making the transition from their EFL background to new ESL and EIL contexts. In addition, support should be provided to empower these learners develop in their learning journeys through engagement and encouragement. Finally, leveraging their proactive stance, let us encourage them to empower themselves through managing their own learning and transitions.

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# 4

## BELIEFS AND STRATEGIES

### Enlarging the vision and fueling the action

#### 4.1 Beliefs

Examining the data provided by the focal participants, I found four prominent sub-themes of this learner characteristic, namely, effort; vocabulary; grammar; and nature of language, communication and learning. There was also a minor category, the National University of Singapore (NUS) learning context. It is significant to note that the beliefs of these learners appeared to have undergone some transitions during their sojourn in NUS.

##### 4.1.1 Effort

All of the seven focal participants referred to their effort in their English learning in the data, especially in their first year in NUS. In their diaries and face-to-face interviews, the learners indicated their belief that effort is important for learning English well. Shen, who hardly mentioned effort directly in the diaries, conceded thus in the face-to-face interview: “Of course, somebody else’s help is useful but I think without . . . without our own efforts we can’t succeed, even [if] our teachers are very good” (Shen\_F). However, he *displayed* [emphasis added] effort to a considerable extent. For example, he spent much time and effort on the extra-curricular courses at New Oriental School (NOS) to prepare for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), College English Test Band 4 and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) while he was in China (Shen\_D). Each morning during the Bridging Course (BC), he also memorised ten pages of vocabulary from dictionaries (Shen\_E).

Chu, another student who also attended NOS, recorded in her diary the many efforts she made to improve her English. In the face-to-face interview,

she also emphasised that effort is more important than intelligence for language learning:

And then hard work definitely will help you. Because for language, it's not a matter of how smart you are. Not like the maths problems . . . you just don't, just can't figure out how to do that. But for English . . . for example, if you read a sentence for a hundred times, of course you will remember it.

(Chu\_F)

Sun, yet another firm believer in the need for effort in English learning, assessed her progress this way: "I think I can get a good grade if I study hard enough" (Sun\_F). Chu and Sun also seemed to attribute this belief in effort to the traditional Chinese culture of learning (TCCL). Chu mentioned that it is in Chinese culture to work hard at language learning to achieve success, while Sun expressed the perception that Chinese students "are more diligent", and used to hard work in order "to get [into] a relatively good university" (Sun\_F).

The participants' belief in the need for effort led to investments that were almost always made with an eye to the future. Tang wrote in his diary that he had "to spend more time and effort, as language learning is a *long* [emphasis added] process" (Tang\_D). Wei while lamenting the slow progress of his English learning nonetheless made plans to improve his situation, "Yes, yesterday has gone. Tomorrow is another day. In the coming days, I plan to read more books, because I think it's a good way to improve all aspects of my English" (Wei\_D). Ping, reflected that he should pay "more attention" to his essays after he was admonished by a BC teacher to do better than the D grade he received for one assignment (Ping\_D). Qi, being "keenly aware" of his weakness in spoken English, revealed his inner struggles: "i am trying to persuade myself to make full use of every opportunity to practise my spoken English" (Qi\_D).

However, by the end of their NUS career, the students seemed to focus less on effort. True, in the email interview responses, some, like Wei and Sun, still advised their prospective juniors from China to be disciplined, to set goals and to work hard to achieve these goals. The rest, however, seemed to have other overarching concerns. Shen was concerned about becoming as conversant in English as he was in Chinese so that English could become "an instinct" from his mind (Shen\_E). Chu and Qi focused on the nature of communication so that the ability and the courage to speak intelligible English should override their scruples about accurate grammar. According to Qi, "as long as you can make yourself understood, it does not matter whether the sentence has correct grammar or not, especially when we are talking about spoken English" (Qi\_E). Tang expressed his concern about the possible fossilisation of his accent and resolved to overcome that before it was too late. He also reflected on motivation which must precede effort: "I figure that down to fundamental, they have been motivated to enter the doors by themselves" (Tang\_E).

The above development may reflect the fact that, nearly five years spent living and studying in a new learning context had made an impact on these learners in terms of the strength of their belief about effort. Effort is still important, but it is not the sole or paramount factor in learning and using English well. They had apparently learnt that other factors such as boldness and motivation are important too. Thus, the learners' belief about effort remained firm but had undergone some change in terms of its centrality. Perhaps, future Chinese learners can be guided to balance the TCCL emphasis on effort with other considerations; this will be explored in Discussion.

### 4.1.2 Vocabulary

Vocabulary learning was described as another tenet of the TCCL in the literature; learners from the People's Republic of China (PRC) were socialised into the mindset that words are key to the language-learning process. This became apparent early in my contact with Chinese students who asked me at the beginning of the BC for "word lists". They also jotted new vocabulary they had learnt into dedicated notebooks which they consulted when they wrote their essays; some were observed to be learning the new words "by heart".

Let us begin with Chu and Shen who mentioned vocabulary most extensively in their diaries and interviews. Chu is an example of early socialisation into the TCCL conceptualisation of vocabulary. She related in her diary the "vivid metaphor" which her first teacher used: "words are the bricks of the building of English" In turn, she adopted this belief: "This vivid metaphor . . . urged me to remember English words as many as possible" (Chu\_D). For Chu, vocabulary was the supreme concern, her early mindset being reinforced and conditioned by the exam-oriented Chinese culture of learning. "But for those exams, it's just need to remember a lot, a lot of vocabularies . . . so I always have a notion that vocabulary is a must" (Chu\_F).

Shen reflected in his diary that words were a key component of English and more important than grammar. They carried the weight of "the information flood" for the future and will "broaden horizons" for him. Thus, to his mind, PRC students should "read as much as possible and catch up with the trend of the world" and this means "Chinese need to learn more English words to do so" (Shen\_D). He conceded, however, that mastery of vocabulary was only possible after long, repeated practice. Hence, for students like Shen, due to their conceptualisation of the future role of English in their lives and their beliefs about the power of words, they applied themselves diligently to the learning of vocabulary. This focus on vocabulary has, in another perspective, to do with an imagined future community from which they will take their identity, a community where English is key to their integration.

And how does a PRC learner "remember" lists of words? Tang, among others, revealed that regular review of learnt vocabulary is necessary and so is reciting the words. However, he was not content with just learning vocabulary per se; it should become "live vocabulary" available for use in everyday life (Tang\_D). Sun also believed in learning words "by heart for several times". It is akin to maintaining a good

friendship; she wrote in her diary that “to make friend with a word, you should see it frequently” (Sun\_D). However, not all the seven learners liked learning by memorising and reviewing. Although Wei asserted that learning vocabulary is important (“Spoken, listening is good but more new words may be even better.”), he revealed that he was reluctant “to memorise the vocabulary, the grammars” during his schooldays in China (Wei\_F). Another “dissenter” was Ping who recalled his experience in a parallel situation: “A list of new vocabulary would be waiting for us all the time. . . . Though there is no easy way for studying English, I do not like to learn this way” (Ping\_D).

However, the strength of the concern for vocabulary seemed to weaken with time. In the email interview, belief in the importance of vocabulary learning was hardly mentioned. It appeared to have paled in significance compared to other concerns that surfaced during the latter period of their learning journey. One reason could be that they had already learnt how to expand their vocabulary so they were not anxious anymore. Another possibility was perhaps the development of a different mindset: vocabulary is not the most crucial measure of language mastery.

### 4.1.3 Grammar

The issue of grammar surfaced in some of the participants’ diaries and interviews. However, their beliefs on the importance of grammar for English learning seemed to vary. To begin with, grammar appeared to be inextricably linked to the exam system in some participants’ minds. In describing the Chinese English Language Teaching (ELT) situation, Wei alluded to this connection: “in our high school, our emphasise just in learning new words, grammars and to pass the exam” (Wei\_F). Shen expressed similar sentiments: “teacher just emphasize on the grammar part and . . . the exam is a burden on the high school students” (Shen\_F). However, these two learners did not seem to think that grammar was crucial for learning English. Shen stated it explicitly: “In comparison [to vocabulary], grammar is not so important because if grammar is not built on words, grammar will be useless” (Shen\_F).

Without referring to exams like Wei and Shen, Qi also exhibited a disregard of grammar. He wrote in his diary that he “had got the viewpoint that grammar [was] not vital for English learning” during his senior middle schooldays. This belief caused him to stop paying attention to his English teacher, Mrs Z, who “attached importance to grammar” (Qi\_D). Another learner, Ping, revealed his belief that English learning must go beyond grammar. Referring to the Chinese ELT context, he asserted: “The only thing you have to learn is grammar. You don’t have to speak. . . . But I think it’s very important for language learners to speak and listen” (Ping\_F). So these two learners also did not seem to think that mastering grammar was crucial for learning English.

In contrast to her four peers mentioned above, Chu appeared to value grammar and reflected quite extensively on its importance in her diary during the BC. She believed that “Chinese students are known to be good at grammar.” She herself embraced the critical role of grammar and found it “quite useful at the outset of learning a new language” and had “been reading many grammar books and doing many related exercises”. In fact, she was trying to pick up French on her own this

way. Thus, when she found that the BC did not focus on grammar, she “felt quite unnatural and strange”. But she also analysed the problems with the emphasis on grammar in Chinese ELT: “the root of our Chinese students always learning ‘deaf English’ is that we put too much emphasis on grammar which definitely slows the speed” with the more serious consequence of “losing the confidence” (Chu\_D).

In the above descriptions, we see contrasting beliefs about the role of grammar. Strangely, Qi and Chu, with their initial divergent beliefs about grammar, came to the same conclusion about its role by the time they graduated from their Undergraduate Degree Programme (UDP). In her advice to her juniors, Chu advocated communication and courage over correctness:

For oral English: Forget about all the grammars you’ve learnt for exams in China. Just communicate. Dare to speak out. You don’t have to speak perfect English. As long as you can get others understand what you mean, your English is good enough.

(Chu\_E)

For Qi, he found that the greatest change from the beginning of his learning journey had been in his confidence to speak. He had come to believe that “language is just a tool for communication, as long as you can make yourself understood, it does not matter whether the sentence has correct grammar or not, especially when we are talking about spoken English” (Qi\_E). Thus, for these two learners, it appeared that the fear of making grammatical mistakes, which keeps many Chinese learners silent, had become less of a hindrance. It was a huge transition for Chu and Qi as they seemed liberated from the tyranny of the need for grammatical perfection. Thus, their perceptions about grammar had changed during their sojourn in NUS. The other participants did not mention grammar in the email interview; grammar might have also become a non-issue for them by then.

In summary, the belief about grammar varied both synchronously and diachronically among the seven learners. Chu saw grammar as important for learning a language, while Qi and Shen detracted from its significance in their own learning experiences. Falling between these two extremes, Sun, Wei, Ping and Tang seemed to accept the role of grammar as another tenet of the TCCL, but they did not relish having to study it to pass exams. Diachronically, change was most evident in Chu who seemed to begin to question the value of grammar for PRC learners in her last diary entry at the end of the BC. By the time of her graduation four years later, the doubt had developed into full conviction.

#### **4.1.4 Nature of language, communication and language learning**

The Chinese learners in my study held and developed various beliefs about the nature of language, communication and language learning. These beliefs in turn impacted the way they navigated their learning journey. On the other hand, the

course of their journey through their new learning context also reshaped the beliefs of some of the participants.

Some of the participants believed in learning English through authentic communication. Ping advocated everyday use of English in interpersonal interaction: “Because English is a language, you have to use it. You cannot communicate with a computer” (Ping\_F). He held this belief till the time of his graduation for he responded in the email interview thus: “Learning is accumulated everyday with everyone” (Ping\_E). Similar to Ping in his belief about “natural” language learning and communication, Qi asserted: “I think learning languages should start from conversation . . . speaking, start as a language not as a code.” His belief in learning through authentic communication was based on his belief that “language is just an interaction between people so you can help each other.” And hence: “You learn from your communications with others” (Qi\_F). This belief expressed in the face-to-face interview at the end of his first year in NUS seemed to have remained constant as indicated in the email interview about four years later. “I realized that language is just a tool for communication, as long as you can make yourself understood, it does not matter whether the sentence has correct grammar or not, especially . . . spoken English” (Qi\_E).

Sun also saw language as a tool for communication and, thus, one can “learn by living”. However, her perspective was more academic than that of Ping and Qi as she wrote in her diary: “learning English different from learning physics or chemistry because English is a language, it’s a tool of communication, a medium of information . . . by which you can do what you want to do” (Sun\_D). Moreover, she perceived the different language skills as being interconnected. Writing and speaking are related in her mind thus: “for both of them, you should try to express your opinions clearly and effectively. . . . If we can write well, we can speak fluently” (Sun\_D). Her beliefs did not seem to have changed over the course of her UDP. In the email interview, her focus on language was still largely academic: “because we deal with academic english everyday, I get very familiar with it” (Sun\_E).

Yet another learner who perceived language as a tool was Wei. In the face-to-face interview, he revealed a functional view of English learning when he said, “we had to learn it because in the university all the lectures are . . . given by English, so we have to learn it or we will [be] in trouble” (Wei\_F). During the email interview given at the end of his UDP, his response was an echo of his earlier instrumental sentiment: “I has not purposely studied English during this journey, but it is a tool, you have to use always” (Wei\_E). In contrast, while Shen also appeared to be quite stable in his views about the functional nature of language and communication, there was a slight but perceptible development. He had also referred to English as a tool for communication in his diary during the BC. However, this notion seemed to have developed organically over time. In his email interview, he evaluated his own progress on his learning journey thus: “English is already a tool in my hand, but not an instinct from my mind” (Shen\_E). This extension from “tool” to “instinct” may indicate a growth in his belief about language that is beyond the functional.

In contrast, Chu, who was always quite candid, appeared to have undergone a greater transition in her beliefs about language, communication and language learning. Initially, in her perception, the ways of speaking Chinese and English are quite different. Hence, she duly experimented with different ways for speaking practice. As for vocabulary and syntax, the choice of memorisation as a strategy seemed a logical one to Chu: “But for English . . . for example, if you read a sentence for a hundred times, of course you will remember it” (Chu\_F). However, about five years later, in the email interview, she had this advice for a fictitious junior to this effect: intelligibility is sufficient for communication; perfect grammar is not necessary. For Chu, her beliefs about the nature of language, communication and language learning influenced her learning strategies, but these beliefs had also been modified by her ESL and EIL learning contexts.

Tang was probably the participant among the seven who reflected most deeply and extensively on the nature of language, communication and language learning. He expressed his belief that “language learning is a long process” and thus he had “to spend more time and effort” (Tang\_D). Accordingly, his beliefs led to much effort and thought to improve his command over time. Around the time of his graduation, however, Tang reflected on a new aspect of the nature of language learning, the issue of language fossilisation, in the email interview. He was especially concerned about his accent: “people’s accent become hard to change as they grow up.” (Tang\_E). He followed up my probe on how he arrived at this belief with an example he encountered at a university conference: his perception of “fossilisation” in the speech of several renowned Chinese-born American physicists. He also believed it was important to have feedback from others when learning a foreign language as one might not be sensitive to the nuances apparent to native speakers. These ongoing reflections signalled the development in Tang’s thinking about language, communication and language learning. He had become more of a thinker than a mere learner and consumer of language in the course of his UDP.

To sum up, the focal participants varied in their beliefs about language, communication and language learning. It is also significant to note that, for most of them, their beliefs had remained relatively stable, although for some, especially Shen, Chu and Tang, their beliefs had evolved somewhat. English was still generally seen as a necessary and useful tool for communication and academic pursuits, but there were also beginning notions of the language as an essential part of self. It may be that the Chinese learners’ perceptions of the nature of language, communication and language learning shape their strategies, which in turn influence their approaches to learning.

#### **4.1.5 *The NUS ESL and EIL context***

Some of the focal participants also touched on their beliefs regarding the NUS and Singapore learning contexts, albeit to a lesser extent than they did for effort, vocabulary, grammar, nature of language, communication and language learning. These few learners saw their new ESL and EIL context as an important factor to facilitate learning.

In his early experience during the BC, Tang seemed to think that his slow progress in talking “freely” to local residents in English might be due to the Singapore sociocultural situation. He ventured that it was perhaps partly because “Singapore is not totally a English speaking country” and cited the example of staff at the NUS Computer Centre and in the bookshop replying him in Chinese when he had spoken to them in English (Tang\_D). However, Tang eventually learnt to create the environment he needed for speaking English. When his Final Year Project (FYP) team extended their welcome to him in Chinese, he “insisted on speaking English and soon they accepted it” (Tang\_A).

Shen also saw the socio-cultural context as important for his English learning. In his first year in NUS, the environment was very helpful for him as “all around is English” (Shen\_F). However, in the subsequent four years, while maintaining his belief in the importance of the learning context, he seemed to have shifted in his perception of his sociocultural setting. For him, “to master a language, it is necessary to understand the culture and history of that language”, but he confessed that he was “not living in a English society full of English culture and history” (Shen\_E). It is possible that, in choosing to pursue his PhD programme in the United States, Shen was looking for a new English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as an International Language (EIL) context which could better provide the ideal sociocultural environment he aspired to live in, one that was closer to his imagined community.

Chu believed that all the different phases of her NUS career were helpful for her English learning. She summed up this belief regarding the NUS context in the exit email interview by mentioning each phase:

During the bridging course, I had many chances to speak in front of the whole class. It greatly helped build my confidence and courage. The overseas experience during SEP further helped me. With all native speakers around, I was forced to speak English more frequently and to be influenced by their accents and tones. In NUS, I also had many lab meetings to discuss problems with professors and lab mates individually or to present my results to the whole group.

(Chu\_E)

Thus, for some of the participants, their belief in the importance of the ESL and EIL context in NUS did impact the development of their English learning. This belief and its transitions were played out differently for the three participants described above. While Tang went on to create the context he needed right where he was and Shen probably sought one in an Anglophone country, Chu adapted to each stage of her learning context and the attendant experiences.

## 4.2 Strategies

Given their TCCL background and language learning beliefs, what strategies did the focal participants use for learning and practising English? What transitions



took place during nearly five years of being in their ESL and EIL learning context? Analysing the commonalities in the data provided by these seven learners, I discern the following broad approaches with regard to the strategies they used, adopted and adapted:

- 1 Natural approach
- 2 Deliberate approach
- 3 A combination of the two above approaches

Similar approaches to what I term *the natural approach* and the *deliberate approach* that the learners in this study adopted for learning and practising English have been studied elsewhere. Gu (2003), in his case study of the vocabulary learning strategies of two PRC learners, distinguishes between *intentional learning* and *incidental learning* (p. 98). However, I decided not to adopt Gu's terminology for the following reasons. First, "incidental" was used by Gu to refer to "vocabulary acquisition . . . through reading" (p. 76), while the strategies used by the learners in this current study went beyond reading. Second, I have taken my inspiration from the words of one of the learners, Ping: "While in Singapore, we are taught in a *nature* [emphasis added] style" (Ping\_D). Last of all, I feel that "intentional" does not seem to adequately express the intensity with which some of this study's focal participants approached their learning; thus I have decided to use "deliberate" instead.

In the following sub-sections, we will look at these approaches as manifestations of the learner characteristic of strategy use among the seven participants. The labels of "natural" and "deliberate" differentiate between the approach where some learners appear to go with the flow and learn "naturally" from their curriculum and everyday interaction with others and the contrasting approach where the learners use specific techniques or methods to expedite their learning or enhance the outcomes. The data presented by Ping and Qi indicated that they favoured the natural approach, while the deliberate approach was reflected in the data given by Shen, Chu and Sun. The two remaining participants, Wei and Tang, appeared to have used a combination of natural and deliberate approaches.

#### 4.2.1 *Natural approach*

To say that Ping and Qi adopted the natural approach is not to imply that they did not exercise strategic choice on their part but the term is in keeping with their preference for learning through "natural" communication in everyday, normal activities. Ping preferred to learn following the coursework of the BC and his UDP. In his diary, he wrote: "We read, listen and speak a lot everyday. We are really learning and using a language instead a mass of principles." There was evidence of authentic learning; for example, he reported that he learnt to guess global meaning of new vocabulary instead of looking it up straight away in an English–Chinese dictionary: "When I meet a new word, I may not use a E–C dictionary immediately. I just look the whole sentence and get the idea" (Ping\_D). He also preferred to visit

Internet websites that he was genuinely interested in, such as *BBC News* and bird watching forums, where according to him “real English” is used. In the course of his UDP, Ping wrote many laboratory reports and evaluated the practice as helpful. He described his use of English in these assignments as “spontaneous” because the language was “a natural tool for science” (Ping\_F). Thus, Ping approached learning in an authentic, cumulative way. In the email interview, he summed up his approach thus: “Learning is accumulated everyday with everyone” (Ping\_E).

The other focal participant who seemed to advocate and practise the natural approach with regard to learning strategies was Qi. While in the BC, he followed his heart, and spent much time speaking and writing on the topics that interested him. He also gave this impression during the face-to-face interview: “I think learning languages should start from conversation . . . speaking, start as a language not as a code” (Qi\_F). In other words, language learning should be as close to authentic communication as possible. He revealed further that he spoke English when playing basketball with other international students in his student hall as this was their lingua franca. During his UDP, exposure to and interaction during normal daily activities in the hall “helped [him] a lot”. Qi’s approach was probably based on his belief that “language is just an interaction between people so you can help each other. . . . You learn from your communications with others” (Qi\_E). Interestingly, Qi’s remark seemed to reflect the Vygotskian sociocultural theory of learning that learning is first social and then individual (Vygotsky, 1978). In class, however, he seldom asked questions because he found it difficult for him “to ask questions in English” (Qi\_F). But this was perhaps compensated later, during his internship, when communicating with the vendors and contractors he encountered. This experience, recounted in the email interview, helped him learn to speak “freely” (Qi\_E). He also reported that the reading and writing assignments he had to do in his UDP enabled him to hone those language skills. So Qi learnt in an authentic, natural way using the opportunities provided by the NUS learning context.

Both Ping and Qi also seemed to show dislike, with even a hint of rebellion, against the possible restrictions of the TCCL strategy of memorising texts which were to be regurgitated for exams. Ping called that “humdrum memory” and asserted: “I do not like to learn this way” (Ping\_D). Qi critiqued the examination-driven education system in which students worked hard on exercises assigned by teachers but “never enter[ed] the door of learning English”, that is, they never really learnt English (Qi\_F). Thus, throughout their NUS sojourn, both Ping and Qi stayed with their preferred approach to learning English in a “natural”, authentic and cumulative way.

#### **4.2.2 Deliberate approach**

In contrast to Ping and Qi, Shen appeared to have embraced the deliberate approach. Among the seven focal participants, Shen may be considered the most successful learner on two counts: first, he excelled in the Qualifying English Test (QET) for freshmen so that he was exempted from the Basic English and English for Academic

Purposes modules, and second, on graduation from NUS, he was admitted to Johns Hopkins University in the United States for a PhD programme. Shen seemed to have adhered to the TCCL tenet of memorisation of vocabulary. However, this basic strategy was enhanced in his hands so that it was no mere memorisation or rote learning for him; he stressed intelligent application and enhancement as well. He expounded his strategy of memorising words from a dictionary as follows:

The important thing is not to linger on one strange word for too long, but simply read through the word, its meaning and the sample sentence, at the same time try to think of a situation you may use this word. . . . It is also of extreme importance to learn reading and writing in bridging course, that is where we may utilize the newly-learned words and enhance the learning procedure, rather than simple memorizing.

(Shen\_E)

This well-thought-through procedure that Shen used to learn and practise vocabulary was revealed towards the end of his UDP. However, from the beginning of the BC, Shen already showed that he employed a deliberate approach to learning English. In the learner diary he kept during his first six months in Singapore, he reported on his chief strategy of preview and memorisation of vocabulary lists. This was a strategy which he had practised since he was a junior middle school student in China. He also described other deliberate strategies like attending special classes at the NOS in China to prepare for the major exams of College English Test Band 4 (CET4) and TOEFL. When he came to Singapore, he brought along two dictionaries for CET4 and CET6 respectively; he had started to memorise ten pages per week when he was still in senior high school and went on to memorise ten pages per day during the BC.

From the face-to-face interview six months into his UDP, we learn that Shen had expanded his repertoire of strategies to watching movies and playing computer games. Thus, he had made a transition by adopting some non-TCCL strategies. The former strategy of watching movies he found helpful for listening to English and carried it out in a systematic fashion: "I will watch F.R.I.E.N.D.S. every day, for 20 minutes." For the latter one of playing computer games in English, he was motivated by his interest, especially when Chinese versions were not available: "So I had to play the English versions and I learnt a lot" (Shen\_F). Basically, however, his approach remained rooted in TCCL's focus on the memorisation of vocabulary, a focus that surfaced time and again in his diary and interviews. His targeted, deliberate approach to learning English appeared to have been well aimed and found its mark as he did well in the QET and in his application to Johns Hopkins University.

Another learner who adopted a deliberate approach in her English learning strategies was Chu. Like Shen, she was also a high achiever admitted into a direct PhD programme after her UDP, one offered by NUS. However, unlike him, her data show that she employed a rather eclectic range of strategies that included both TCCL and non-TCCL methods, even while in China. She was also more intense

in the way she went about her English learning, almost impatient it seemed, to find the “right” strategies to becoming a more proficient learner and user of English at optimal pace.

Let us look at the TCCL strategies Chu adopted while she was in China. She reported in her diary that she read avidly and regularly, having “commanded” and challenged herself to read books in the unabridged versions, for example, the Harry Potter series. She extended the strategy of reading in order to “remember words” to using the vocabulary learnt in her essays. She also memorised “beautiful articles”, a method which was “quite important” to her as a strategy (Chu\_F). Yet another strategy she found helpful was repeated practice for reciting and listening, using tapes and later MP3 players as aids. While in her hometown, she attended extra-curricular English classes at NOS. However, Chu did not stop at these methods; she extended the TCCL methods and adopted non-traditional ones too. From listening to the radio as advised by her high school teacher, she went on to listening to CDs for English learning, playing them before bedtime until it became a daily routine. When vocabulary learning software became available, she described it as “kind of opened [her] door to English” (Chu\_F).

How did Chu develop in her use of strategies after she arrived in Singapore? During the BC, there were deliberate attempts to explore new strategies. She sought to improve her English skills through the intra- and inter-class debates. Then, to sound more like a native speaker, she experimented with a method called “One-Breath” English, that is, “to hold a breath and then speak English as quickly, loudly, clearly as possible” (Chu\_D). Another method she experimented with, but which did not quite get off the ground, was to speak English exclusively with friends in their hostel. However, she concluded that this social strategy “just felt so strange . . . more natural to speak Chinese” (Chu\_F). After joining her UDP, she found more opportunities to practise speaking as she reported in the face-to-face interview. Chu made the conscious choice of joining study and laboratory groups which included nationalities other than her own; in her student residential hall, she also interacted in English with exchange students from other countries. Thus, Chu had transitioned to social strategies in her determined efforts to expand her repertoire.

One other noteworthy element in Chu’s strategy use is how she harnessed metacognitive strategy to plan her learning on the one hand, and affective strategy to regulate her emotions on the other. For the former, she frequently evaluated her progress or the task demands and made plans, adjustments and other provisions to accomplish her goals. For example, she employed metacognitive strategy to prepare and give the oral report during the BC so that she could fulfil the task demands and purposes. During her UDP, she planned to study English during her first semester’s vacation to prepare for modules that required a greater extent of essay writing. Chu also used affective strategy to help her overcome setbacks she experienced. As a representative of her BC group’s debating team, she did well until they lost the second round. To deal with the setback and her discouragement as a result of the loss, Chu encouraged herself that she had tried hard and had learnt positively from the experience. She also encouraged herself to accept the fear of losing face when

speaking English in public and with strangers, and to go on despite her “shyness” (Chu\_D). In all, Chu was a determined strategist; she constantly and deliberately adapted her strategies to meet the learning demands she faced.

Sun also exhibited a deliberate approach in her learning and practising strategies. At the beginning of her English learning journey in Singapore, during the BC, she reported in her diary entries the different strategies she chose. Some were related to the TCCL strategies she had used as a student in China like learning vocabulary “by heart” (Sun\_D), while some others were new ones she discovered, experimented with and adopted in her new learning context in Singapore. For both categories, the data indicated deliberate learning on her part. Among the new strategies she adopted was social strategy; for example, newly arrived, she was thrilled that she could communicate with strangers in English to get a page printed at the campus printshop. Her takeaway from this early experience during the BC was: “So don’t be shy to speak English to strangers” (Sun\_D). Sun also tried out content-based learning where she tried to pick up Science and English at the same time from Science texts in English. She evaluated this strategy rather positively. Paying attention to the English all around her in her near immersion environment was likewise useful. She aptly reflected, “If you are careful and pay attention . . . you will learn more and live better” (Sun\_D).

However, about midway through the BC, Sun seemed to revisit the strategy which had “proved to be an excellent way” during her senior middle schooldays: reading aloud or reciting “some excellent prose” (Sun\_D). She even suggested in her diary that the teachers include reading aloud or reciting as part of the BC. Another strategy she advocated during the same period was that of exerting effort, that is, giving due diligence to read, think, speak and write more. Both these methods were typical of the TCCL strategies. Sun did not stop here, however; she continued to expand her repertoire. For example, she used affective strategy, when her motivation was low, by encouraging herself to overcome her negative feelings and to make plans to push ahead in her learning. In terms of social strategy, Sun valued the warm, supportive atmosphere of her BC group, showing that the social dimension as well as the affective domain were important for her learning. Yet another strategy she practised belonged to the metacognitive category where she evaluated task demands to prepare for her weekly oral report. Sun recounted that she spent “a lot of time” to plan the topic and the delivery (Sun\_E).

By the time she was one semester into her UDP, Sun seemed to have settled down to an overarching strategy of “practise more” as she considered that it was “the most useful strategy for learning English”. So she planned “to read more English books . . . and then speak more.” This harks back to the TCCL strategy based on the belief that effort is critical to success in learning. As Sun herself expressed it, “If you study hard enough, you can learn it well” (Sun\_F). At the end of her four-year UDP, when asked in the email interview what advice she would give to an imaginary junior, Sun advocated self-directedness and self-discipline in the BC: making a plan, setting a goal and not straying “from the right path” (Sun\_E). In other words, a conscious and deliberate approach is necessary for one to reach one’s destination

in the English learning journey. Sun started with a TCCL foundation but actively built on it by expanding her repertoire of learning strategies. Yet, this transition did not cause her to give up her roots. She seemed to have remained firmly grounded in her original beliefs and strategies, while reaching out to include new ones.

### 4.2.3 *A combination of natural and deliberate approaches*

The two remaining participants demonstrated a combination of the natural and deliberate approaches described above. Starting with Wei, he appeared to be a very deliberate learner who was ready to experiment with learning strategies, right from the beginning of the BC, as he reported in his diary. He initiated an agreement with his roommates in the hostel to speak only English among themselves from 8 to 10 pm nightly. The strategy worked, and he obviously enjoyed it, judging by his evaluation that he felt “really good” about the method (Wei\_D). Within the next month, he also added the strategies of listening to the BBC, writing a diary, reading more books and skipping difficult vocabulary during reading. He evaluated his learning again as he reported that his “comprehension ha[d] improved slightly” (Wei\_D). Thus, Wei also constantly evaluated and monitored his strategies, a deliberate, metacognitive strategy in itself. He expanded the earlier strategies subsequently, for example, not just reading any books, but novels and academic ones “like math or physics”, so as to “improve the advantages and overcome the disadvantages”. The latter was also related to his use of affective strategy to encourage himself, especially midway through the BC when he felt “powerless and void”, unsure of how much progress he had made (Wei\_D).

In the face-to-face interview, Wei revealed another deliberate strategy that he later adopted; he watched how others went about learning English. He contemplated his peers’ strategies and weighed the possible benefits:

One of my friends . . . I often saw her learn new words just, carry a very, very, very heavy dictionary and just remember it one page after one page. I don’t [know] is good or not, but she actually learnt a lot of words and her English test very good.

(Wei\_F)

Thus, he made himself aware of other possible strategies while being proactive in managing his own learning strategies. During his four years in the UDP, he also tried “to force” himself to speak, write, listen and read English so that his language skills “improved greatly”. Yet, strangely, he considered himself as not having “purposely studied English” in his response to the email interview (Wei\_E).

However, there appeared to be some transition in his approach to strategy use during the later stage of his UDP. Wei also revealed in the email interview that, during his SEP and FYP, he benefited from the many opportunities to use English in a more informal, natural approach. In his SEP, he was “totally immersed in the US educational culture”. Moreover, he had ample time to interact with classmates

“inside and outside the lecture room”. There was even a weekly lunch time with their professor. In sum, he made many friends both from the United States and other countries . . . “and also learned a lot from them”. In the FYP, he had a German professor for his supervisor so that communication had to be in English “all the time”. He spoke “a lot” and his English “improved naturally” (Wei\_E). As many of the professors in the Physics Department were native English speakers, interacting with them also helped Wei’s English skills. Wei may be considered as a high achiever too as he was offered direct entry to a PhD programme in NUS after completing his UDP. The marrying of natural and deliberate approaches had been fruitful in his case.

The last participant whom we will discuss in this sub-section is Tang. His is a fascinating case study in that he came full circle in his approach to learning and practising strategies. He started out as a deliberate strategist during the BC, then gradually settled into a more natural approach during the earlier part of his UDP, before being jolted by an encounter during his SEP to turn again to a deliberate approach.

Starting from his diary during his first six months in NUS, it was easy to see that Tang seriously analysed his learning strategies as well as his performance and experiences in the BC. The topics of the entries were often about a proven strategy or a new-found one, for example, “Reciting”, “Study on line” and “Retelling”. This underlined the earnest effort he made to find the “right” strategies to his learning. He first looked back to his schooldays in China where reciting articles was the most important strategy for him. Then finding this strategy inadequate for the task demands of the Oral Report in the BC, he adopted the use of “recalling” of key words, that is, a mnemonic strategy (Tang\_D). He then went beyond familiar TCCL territory to leverage technology: using the Internet for his English learning based on well-thought out principles of its advantages over print materials. Applying the same rigorous analysis to the intra- and inter-class debates, he evaluated their task significance methodically. Eventually, he evaluated his time-tested strategy of reciting and found it inadequate for reviewing vocabulary. So he turned to retelling in his own words what he read, being inspired by the abridged Penguin Readers. Like some of the other participants, Tang also used affective and metacognitive strategies to manage his emotions and plan his learning respectively. For example, when he received an “E” grade for an essay, he was very disturbed. However, he calmed himself and ended that diary entry by encouraging himself to improve despite the lateness of the revelation about his poor editing skills. Thus, Tang also seemed to cross certain thresholds in his learning as he consciously adopted and adapted strategies.

In his UDP, Tang became very absorbed in his studies as a Physics major and did not appear to focus on English learning. In the email interview, however, he described why he had to spend “an awesome amount of time in English”: “[t]here is no such things like translation when I do physics. In fact, I have trouble to talk physics in Chinese.” Thus, he read broadly and deeply into the philosophy and history of science, not as a deliberate strategy for learning English, but “in attempt to discover



the secret of universe”. This consistent, authentic exposure made an impact nonetheless. “And in that period of intense reading, I could really feel the improvement of my English language.” Tang developed to the point where he was “proficient in English reading and listening and even naturally think in English”. However, his speaking might have lagged behind, prompting him to say that “thinking in English is still different from articulating in the same language” (Tang\_E).

His perceived handicap in speaking really bothered him during his SEP at an American university. First, he felt the SEP experience, although positive on the whole, did not enhance his articulation: “Staying at the same level after completing SEP made me feel ashamed of myself and that motivates me to listen to English program and talk to English speaking people” (Tang\_E). He reckoned that he spent most of his time on his research projects and left little time for socialising. Second, in his autobiography, he recalled an encounter in a Chinese restaurant during his SEP. He met a Chinese waiter who “spoke in perfect American accent” after having been in the United States for only six months. The waiter said he attained his proficiency “by diligence”. Tang revealed that he felt “terribly ashamed” after that encounter and decided to renew his efforts to improve his English in a focused, deliberate approach (Tang\_A).

Hence, after he returned to NUS from the SEP, Tang chose a FYP where he “should not end up practicing Chinese with people”. The supervisor was a professor from Germany and half his project group did not speak Chinese. When the other half spoke Chinese to Tang, he “insisted on speaking English and soon they accepted it” (Tang\_A). Although Tang believed in linguistic fossilisation so that “people’s accent becomes hard to change as people grow up,” he encouraged himself to go on learning (Tang\_E). To improve his ability to articulate himself, he revisited learning materials like *New Concept English* and *Crazy English* and explored podcasts from CNN and NBC. He also tuned in to the *BBC World Service* on the radio. Such was his determination to stay on course through his deliberate efforts to improve his speaking skills. It was like the BC days when he pursued English learning with passion and urgency using different strategies. He seemed to have come full circle.

Through the various stages in their English learning journey, from BC to UDP, IP or SEP, and finally FYP, the focal participants favoured and practised many learning strategies. Among these were the TCCL cornerstones of reading aloud, recitation, review and memorisation, all with effort, and other methods like reading, watching movies, listening to the radio and using technology. Some of these Chinese learners also used affective, social and metacognitive strategies, while others simply followed their curriculum and went with the flow of everyday interaction with their community. Whatever strategies they leant towards, it was noticed that the students took one approach or another, natural or deliberate, or combined these two. Transition was seen in the growth and expansion of their repertoire of strategies over time, whatever approach they adopted. In their transitions from EFL to ESL and EIL, they adapted the TCCL strategies or experimented with and added new strategies, demonstrating the active stance they took towards their English learning.



### 4.3 Discussion

As EFL learners newly arrived from China, the seven focal participants held certain clear beliefs about English learning and the most frequently mentioned were those related to effort, vocabulary, grammar, and the nature of language learning and communication. A few of the learners also revealed their beliefs on the influence of the learning context. However, we learnt that, during their NUS sojourn, while their belief in effort had stayed relatively firm, their beliefs about vocabulary, grammar and the nature of language learning and communication had undergone greater transition. The result was a broadening of perspective so that they focused less on the individual aspects of vocabulary and grammar and increasingly on communication itself and discourse purposes.

The focal participants' firm belief in effort for achievement was borne out by their willingness to invest time and resources, take action and explore new strategies. Why had this belief in effort held steady among the Chinese students throughout their learning journey? Where does this seemingly unassailable belief come from? Probably, this tenacity is no surprise to those who are acquainted with the Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC); the belief is rooted in traditional Chinese culture itself. It is in fact enshrined in Chinese proverbs like "*shaozhuang bu nuli, lao da tu shangbei*" ("if one does not exert oneself in youth, one will regret it in old age"). Along with that proverb and similar adages which I had to learn as a primary school student, I have lived with the ethos embodied in them ever since. It was interesting to note that, in his bestselling book, *Outliers*, Gladwell (2008) cited historian Arkush (1984) on Chinese proverbs to underscore his point that hard work is ingrained in the Chinese psyche. These sayings, according to Gladwell, "are striking in their belief that 'hard work, shrewd planning and self-reliance or cooperation with a small group will in time bring recompense'"; an example is, "If a man works hard, the land will not be lazy" (p. 278). In his email interview, one participant, Tang, actually used a pithy remark that sounded almost proverbial: "[F]ew things are unattainable by hard work." Thus, this belief in effort for achievement is an asset that teachers can exploit for pedagogical advantage in helping Chinese students transition from EFL to ESL and EIL.

While effort remained a cornerstone in the belief system of the focal participants, their beliefs in the importance of vocabulary and grammar, and in the influence of the nature of language, communication and language learning experienced some changes. What could have caused this transition? It is probable that, during their sojourn in NUS, these beliefs were tempered by their experiences in their new learning contexts. They were engaged in almost daily interaction with fellow students and faculty, both local and international, in the course of their BC and UDP. Some of them were also involved in the SEP, IP and/or FYP. The Internet and social media most probably added to their opportunities for interactions in English. Altogether, new ways of learning, thinking and doing were available for these Chinese learners to experiment with, adopt or adapt and provided them with opportunities for communication and growth as ESL and EIL learners. Thus, the email interviews

revealed a greater concern for meaningful discourse and the ability to accomplish tasks than for the discrete, micro aspects of language learning. Pedagogically, we can draw the implication that it is possible to guide our Chinese learners away from the preoccupation with vocabulary and grammar towards an understanding of the nature and purpose of authentic communication so that they can act upon appropriate learner beliefs.

How are Chinese students to act upon their beliefs? Chiefly through language learning and practicing strategies. The seven focal participants were indeed characterised by active use of strategies, albeit with noticeable preferences, varying in approach from the “natural” to the “deliberate”. Moreover, one would expect the developments in their belief system to impact the strategy choices of the participants, just as vision would fuel action. The study did witness a broadening of the repertoire of strategies among the learners. Even for those who retained the TCCL tenets of memorisation, review and reciting, they personalised and adapted the strategies to suit their own purposes. This learner characteristic of active strategy use was also where the learners’ agency and investment could be most clearly seen.

Besides the transition in their beliefs, what could account for the transition seen in the expansion of strategies? Being in the NUS learning context, whether in the BC or UDP, the learners were exposed to and challenged by the learning strategies of other learners they were in contact with. For example, during the BC, Wei watched and evaluated his peers’ strategies; he noticed another student who memorised the words from a dictionary and who had very good English test results. Chu found the students in her UDP’s *Doing Science* module to be active participants during their seminars; she felt sidelined initially when she could not express her ideas and participate in the discussion. To overcome this handicap, she adopted the strategy of creating opportunities for practice by working with international students from countries other than her own. In addition, the fear of failure and the desire to succeed had most probably driven these learners to find new means to achieve their goals, thus expanding their strategies in the process. Moreover, we must keep in mind that the concepts of success and failure do not just affect PRC students as individuals. In the Chinese collectivist culture, their success and failure will also affect the “face” of their family. Thus, the participants’ drive to explore strategies that would enhance their learning is understandable. Much was at stake for these young learners and scholarship holders.

How can teachers capitalise on our PRC learners’ use of strategies along with providing guidance for developing their learner beliefs? We may begin by helping them become more aware and more active in the use of learning and practicing strategies. In whole-class or small-group discussions, we can exchange ideas on strategies. Do they notice what methods or approaches they and their friends have adopted in learning English? Are there other possible strategies? Next, we can encourage them to manage their strategy use by keeping a diary/journal of the methods they have experimented with and the effects over a period of time. This can be followed up with regular sharing sessions after a set time. There must be many ways of guiding students in their strategy use, but the above suggestions may serve as useful starters.

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# 5

## MOTIVATION AND IDENTITY

### The power of real and imagined communities

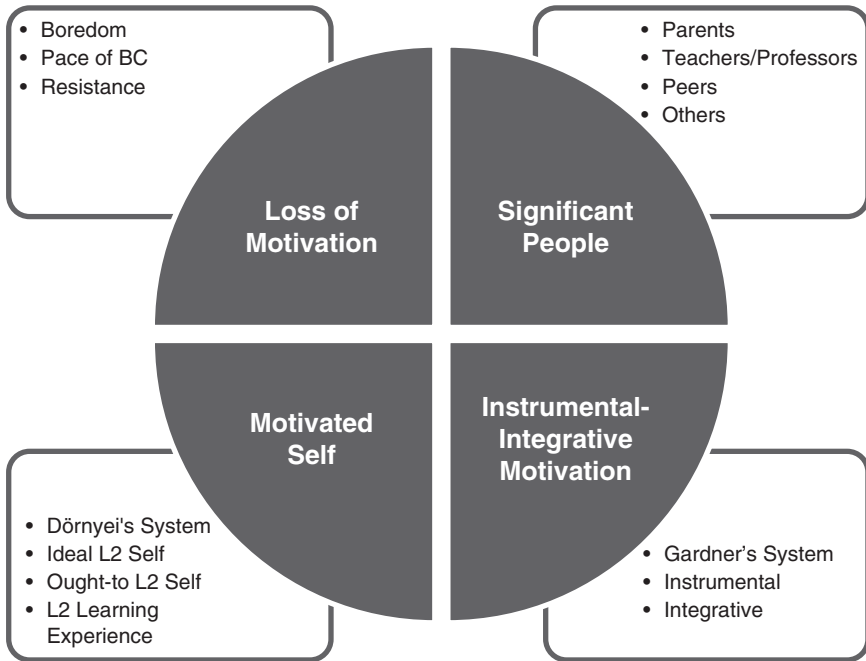
#### 5.1 Motivation from a multi-faceted perspective

The analysis of the data indicates that motivation in learning English was multi-faceted and complex for the seven case study participants. These findings seem logical, given the experiences of these students who had moved from an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context to an English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as an International Language (EIL) one. They were then no more students from a purely traditional Chinese culture of learning (TCCL) context, but learners with a hybrid identity (Teng, 2008). Moreover, as we have already seen in the review of literature, motivation is indeed a complex construct (Gardner, 2001; Syed, 2001; Williams, Burden, & Al-Baharna, 2001). Hence, we should expect that the motivation for English learning was no less complex for the seven PRC learners in this study.

To give us a more organised grasp of the multi-faceted perspective of the students' motivation, I have grouped them into four main descriptions: (1) Instrumental-Integrative Motivation, (2) Motivated Self, (3) Significant People, and (4) Loss of Motivation. The first two facets were derived from the literature on motivation – the research by Gardner and his associates (e.g., Gardner, 2001; Gardner & Lambert, 1972) and Dörnyei (2010). The other two were based on unforeseen, recurring themes in the data. These multiple facets of motivation presented by the seven focal participants are represented visually by Figure 5.1 where the four salient distinctions in the participants' motivation are further broken down into finer-grained aspects.

##### 5.1.1 *Significant people*

The analysis of the seven case studies shows that the influence of significant people on the participants' English learning was critical. During their childhood or early



**FIGURE 5.1** Motivation: a multi-faceted perspective

adolescence years, significant adults, especially their parents and teachers, played a crucial role. At the beginning of their English learning journey (when they were in upper primary or junior middle school), the seven focal participants themselves were probably too young to be motivated to learn a foreign language. Even if they were self-motivated, they would not have known how to direct the course of their early EFL education. Invariably, it was the learners' parents and their English language teachers who encouraged them to take the first steps or who decided their directions.

As pointed out by Larsen-Freeman (2001), when we are studying young learners, we need also to examine the impact of “influential others such as parents, peers and teachers” (p. 20). This insight is supported by Syed (2001) who found that that expectations from society and the family have considerable influence on the motivation of five heritage learners of Hindi. In their diaries and interviews, Shen, Chu, Tang, Ping and Qi looked back to their childhood or early adolescence when their parents, especially their mothers, as well as their teachers charted their learning paths. It can be posited that significant adults have a direct and vital role in nurturing learners from the People's Republic of China (PRC) in their early motivation.

Shen's mother believed that English would play an important role in the future world. Her beliefs resulted in her efforts to carve out a path for Shen's English learning: she initially coached him herself but later engaged a competent tutor

from “the best high school” in their city (Shen\_D). Shen imbibed his mother’s belief and strived to improve his English after his dismal performance in primary school. A second significant adult was his junior middle school English teacher who praised him for his efforts and performance. From then on, he did “nearly perfect in her class” (Shen\_D). In total, his growing motivation turned him from being a poor student of English during primary school to being among the best in junior middle school.

Another learner, Chu, was well-provided for by her parents from the start; she had a computer in her home and vocabulary learning software. She herself also bought tapes and books (Chu\_D). When she was proficient enough to read the original versions of bestsellers, she acquired the Harry Potter series (Chu\_D). Chu also wrote about her English teachers who encouraged her to read, to listen to the radio, to expand her vocabulary (Chu\_D). She was particularly inspired by the enthusiasm and the methods of the teachers of New Oriental School (NOS) (Chu\_D). Again, parents and teachers were the significant others who launched Chu’s early motivation.

Tang revealed in his autobiography that his mother “placed strong emphasis” on his English language education, as “a good beginning is crucial to learning English” and urged him “to follow English tapes”. He had English tuition, one of the few he had ever had. Tang also specifically mentioned one of the “key figures that exert strong influence” on him: Li Yang, the founder of *Crazy English*, an unorthodox method of teaching and learning English. He regularly followed Li’s advice to read English aloud till his mouth got “dry and exhausted”. In junior middle school, Tang’s English teacher encouraged her students to learn texts by heart. Being praised as the best student in reciting texts in the class motivated him to persevere in his learning (Tang\_A). The impact of significant adults appears to be formative for Tang’s English learning journey.

To a less apparent degree, the “latent help” of Ping’s “warm family” kept up his motivation during the BC when he struggled with his oral reports and essay writing. His parents sent him material resources and provided emotional support so that he could concentrate on his English learning (Ping\_D). From the data, it can be surmised that this support from the significant adults in his life had been available to Ping during the early years of his English learning.

As for Qi, two of his English teachers in junior middle school employed different methodologies. While Mrs F required transcription of texts and demanded explanations of answers, Mrs W required reading aloud. Qi found these teachers’ approaches helpful and his English improved through them (Qi\_D). Thus, he was motivated to continue learning through these methods even after he moved to upper classes.

Shifting the focus to the NUS learning context, the participants mentioned other significant people who had impacted their motivation in the different phases of their NUS sojourn. First, it was their teachers in the BC, and their professors in their Undergraduate Degree Programme (UDP) and the Student Exchange Programme (SEP). Second, most of them also alluded to their peers: fellow Senior Middle 3 (SM3) BC students, fellow undergraduates, exchange students in NUS,

SEP peers and Final Year Project (FYP) teammates. One participant, Qi, also mentioned the contractors and vendors in his Internship Programme (IP).

In their face-to-face interviews, both Qi and Tang acknowledged that the BC teachers played an important role in encouraging them to overcome their initial shyness to speak in English. This encouragement was especially crucial for some PRC students who might feel “ashamed” because they could not speak “very good English” (Qi\_F). They had to be motivated to make a start so as to build their confidence. Tang recounted that BC teachers endeavoured to “speak to us in English and encourage conversation among students in English” (Tang\_F). Three years later, in the email interview and his autobiography, he revealed that interaction with people he met during his SEP experience motivated him to try to improve his English further (Tang\_E). He also met a newly arrived PRC migrant “who spoke in perfect American accent.” Thus, he took practical steps in response to the feedback and encounter: “Ever since then, I have been paying more attentions to learning English” (Tang\_A). This extended to his motivation to choose a non-Chinese supervisor for his FYP and speak only in English to his FYP teammates. As for Qi, he reflected that “language is just an interaction between people so you can help each other” (Qi\_F). He applied this particularly during his UDP when he played basketball with the international students at his residential hall. His IP also required him to communicate with vendors and contractors, and he made himself learn to do it: “At the beginning though I was not very confident to talk with them, I had to” (Qi\_E).

Another learner who was “forced to speak” English during the UDP was Chu. She described a seminar-style module called Doing Science where she had to engage with a group of five to ten people, including mentors and students. To articulate her ideas, she pushed herself to speak up and seized opportunities to practise speaking inside and outside the classroom, especially with international and exchange students (Chu\_F). When asked in the email interview what she found most helpful in her UDP, she responded, “Personal in[t]eractions with professors, tutors and class mates”. In her SEP, surrounded by “all native speakers”, once again she “was forced to speak English more frequently and to be influenced by their accents and tones” (Chu\_E).

Wei was also motivated by his SEP experience but, even during his BC days, he had made an effort to speak English nightly with his hostel roommates and described the experience as “full of fun” and “a better way to find out our mistakes than just by ourselves” (Wei\_D). During his SEP in the United States, he interacted regularly with his professor and new friends both inside and outside lectures and “learned a lot from them”. While doing his FYP, he felt empowered to speak “a lot” by his supervisor, a German professor, who could “always forgive [his] bad English” (Wei\_E).

Similarly, Sun found interaction with others in her new learning context in NUS motivating and inspiring. Writing in her diary, she recounted her joy in being able to communicate with total strangers in English to complete a task. She also relished learning with her classmates: “My bridging course is interesting, 21 youths seated together, discussing, chatting, laughing . . . and we cooperate with each

other harmoniously. Generally, we can learn a lot during our classes” (Sun\_D). This motivation encouraged by social interaction also surfaced in the email interview when she advised an imaginary freshman to “make more friends. The friendship developed in this period is really precious and helpful” (Sun\_E). She probably felt helped and motivated by her interaction in English with her peers.

In also giving advice to an imaginary junior in the exit email interview, Shen advocated, “try to communicate more with professors and students after class” (Shen\_E). It was probable that he too had found this interaction motivating for himself. As for Ping, he responded in the email interview that his greatest gain from BC was being able to “communicate with people freely, no shame due to the mistakes in language” (Ping\_E). This candid comment indicates that it was quite liberating and motivating for him to achieve that level of comfort while communicating with others in his new learning context in NUS.

It would not be surprising that as these PRC learners moved from their first learning context in China, which was essentially an EFL one, to their second in NUS, and even a third during SEP or IP, essentially ESL and EIL ones, they experienced a transition in the source of their motivation due to the impact of significant others. The influence by family and early English teachers gave way to that by BC teachers, UDP and SEP professors, IP colleagues and clients or vendors, FYP supervisors and peers who could be local, international or exchange students. They moved from being motivated by the guidance and encouragement of parents and early teachers to being motivated by their authentic interaction with their current teachers and peers. In both cases, however, significant others are a primary source of motivation, as shown by the data.

### ***5.1.2 Instrumental-integrative motivation***

Beginning with my Diploma-in-Education teacher training days, I had explored motivation in terms of the instrumental-integrative binary set based on the research of Gardner and his associates (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 2001). In a bilingual language situation, “a person’s motivation is thought to be determined by his attitudes towards the other group in particular and toward foreign people in general and by his orientation toward the learning task itself” (Gardner & Lambert, 1972, p. 3). The orientation is considered instrumental if the purposes of language study reflect more utilitarian values, such as career advancement. On the other hand, the orientation is integrative when there is a genuine interest to learn more about the other cultural community, to the point of eventually being accepted as a member. Although there were more recent paradigms put forward on motivation, as in the works of Dörnyei, I still found this lens of instrumental-integrative motivation useful for studying the PRC learners’ motivation to learn English. This was because much of what the students presented in the data regarding motivation was expressed in utilitarian and affective or relational terms.

As students enrolled in NUS, the Chinese learners were studying and living in an ESL and EIL learning situation. They had the potential to integrate into the



target language community if they had so wished or they could remain aloof and largely instrumental in their motivation. They could also manifest both types of motivation in their transition through their BC and UDP. The findings from the case studies indicate that, at the beginning, during the BC and first semester of their UDP, instrumental motivation was present in all the seven participants. English was important for their education and future career; it was a useful “tool” as they expressed it. However, some of them also displayed early signs of an integrative orientation. Around the time of their graduation from NUS, some of the learners seemed to have developed more pronounced signs of this integrative orientation although most of them still retained their instrumental motivation. Thus, there were signs of transitions from a mainly instrumental orientation of English as a tool to a more integrative one of English as a channel of communication with a community. These transitions could have helped the participants become more confident and competent learners and users of English.

Let us begin with Tang who responded most extensively on motivation, giving us the fullest reflection on the theme among the seven focal participants. His case study also exemplifies a learner who retained a mainly instrumental motivation despite some small adaptations during his learning journey. Tang’s diary entries during the BC were almost always an exploration of some strategy to improve his English. He was clearly goal-directed in his choices, one indication of motivation, including participation in the inter- and intra-class debates when he felt “forced to learn, forced to practise, more motivated to” (Tang\_F). However, he also approached them with enthusiasm: “I am quite excited” (Tang\_D). The possible beginning of an integrative orientation was also hinted at in his diary entry when he expressed disappointment with his failed attempts to interact with the NUS community in English: “When I went to computer center and asked staff for help, I spoke English, yet they replied me in Chinese. The same thing happened in bookstore” (Tang\_D).

However, his motivation for learning English appeared to be mainly instrumental after he matriculated as revealed in the face-to-face interview; he realised that “it was very important to study English well” after he had encountered some lecturers from China whose “oral English is not good actually, and it does cause some problems to us, both Singaporean and the Chinese students” (Tang\_F). As part of his initiation into his academic community, he read voraciously on the history and philosophy of Science, in the hope of discovering “the secret of the universe”. His passion might have indicated a desire to become a full-fledged member of that community which conducts all its dealings in English, but it could also be the pursuit of an academic ideal. As a by-product of his quest, Tang found that he could think in the language “naturally”, but he aspired to become more articulate as well: “Nonetheless, thinking in English is still different from articulating in the same language” (Tang\_E).

The SEP seemed to have been a watershed in Tang’s motivation: “Staying at the same level after completing SEP made me feel ashamed of myself and that motivates me to listen to English program and talk to English speaking people.” He reflected on the possible reason for not benefitting from his SEP:

I spent majority of my effort in research projects instead of local residents' daily life. . . . I knew one French girl who was also an exchange student . . . and *integrated herself well with local people* [emphasis added]. By the end of exchange program, she spoke very good English.

(Tang\_E)

In the above reflection, Tang seemed to have reasoned that, in contrast with his French counterpart, his focus on research and lack of interaction with the community had cost him the opportunity to improve his English. This self-assessment seemed to reflect a mainly instrumental motivation. Subsequent data from Tang's autobiography appeared to indicate a continued bent towards the instrumental in how he arranged his FYP:

I chose a professor from Germany, of whose group half do not speak Chinese. The other half, of course, spoke Chinese to me on welcoming me into the lab. But I insisted on speaking English and soon they accepted it. During my year-long project, they bore with confusions resulted from my blurred English. And I am grateful to many corrections they made to my language.

(Tang\_A)

We may observe from the above description that Tang gave little hint of a deeper, more integrative engagement with this community. However, Tang reflected deeply on motivation; he mentioned motivation three times in the email interview: a “[d]eep motivation to learn”, his increased motivation to improve his ability to articulate himself before fossilisation set in and the belief that motivation makes the difference in how well one learns. He explained the last instance by quoting the Chinese sage, Confucius:

Just like what Confucius said, “Teachers open the door, but you have to enter by yourself.” . . . It is almost always true that those who do well are proactive and dedicated. I figure that down to fundamental, they have been motivated to enter the doors by themselves.

(Tang\_E)

For Tang himself, his motivation seemed to have leant more towards the instrumental throughout his UDP despite some signs of the integrative during the BC. From my observation, I surmised that, given his retiring nature, it might not have been easy for Tang to integrate with the community around him. Coupled with his goal-oriented approach, it is not surprising that his motivation had remained largely instrumental.

Another participant who appeared to be predominantly instrumental in his motivation might have been Ping. He had reported in different diary entries that he needed to improve his English to meet the task demands of the BC, especially the essays and oral reports. However, in his face-to-face interview, Ping revealed that he

preferred to watch movies and play computer games in their “original language”, that is English (Ping\_F). This could be viewed as a kind of integration in special interest communities, but Ping’s responses were often terse despite probing. Thus, it is inconclusive if this was a sign of a more integrative orientation. He evaluated his progress in his learning journey thus: “I have no problem handling academic issue and daily life and I think I want more professional writing” (Ping\_E). It appears that his motivation was still mainly instrumental, although a slightly more integrative dimension may be argued from his ease with using English in his “daily life”.

Like Ping, there was an inkling of the integrative for Qi, although he appeared to have also remained mainly instrumental in his motivation. Among the seven Chinese learners, Qi seemed the least driven in terms of the need for achievement; his motivation depended on whether he was “interested in the topic” (Qi\_D). Only once in the diary did he express his motivation, probably instrumental, to improve: “I am keenly aware that i am weaker in spoken English than in written English, so i am trying to persuade myself to make full use of every opportunity to practise my spoken English” (Qi\_D). In the face-to-face interview, he stated that he had “no time to learn English further”. His reason was: “I think my English is enough to understand what the lecturer say.” Even in his student hall, Qi did not seem to deliberately seek integration with the community: “I speak when I have to speak. Now I only speak English when I play basketball . . . because there are a lot of foreigners” (Qi\_F). In the email interview at the end of Qi’s UDP, the instrumental motivation seemed to surface again: “I realized that language is just a tool for communication.” This mainly instrumental orientation, however, appeared to have moved slightly towards an integrative one as a result of his internship; he learnt to communicate in English with vendors and contractors: “After some time, I felt comfortable to talk to them and was able to communicate with them freely.” His choice of the words, “comfortable” and “freely”, may point to more authentic communication and perhaps a beginning towards a more integrative motivation (Qi\_E).

In the data he supplied, Shen revealed a mixture of largely instrumental motivation, with a hint of integrative orientation. He seemed to have begun with a strong instrumental orientation. As described in the sub-section on significant people, he was influenced by his mother’s belief that “English will play an important part in future world and it will be a fundamental tool in my future study” (Shen\_D). The idea of English as a tool for his future seemed a utilitarian one. This impression of his instrumental orientation was reinforced by a later entry that English may also have “more important effects on a person’s future career than other subjects” (Shen\_D). This impression continued in his face-to-face interview, when he described English as “widely used”, and he could “have more achievements” and “touch new knowledge, new informations” with English. At the same time, there was the hint of a more integrative orientation as he also seemed to relish the “many interesting things [that] are in English”, and he did “like learning English . . . it’s so useful in our daily life, we can’t do without it” (Shen\_F). In his email interview, Shen explained his willingness to memorise vocabulary thus: “because I know the

importance of words long time ago, and was thinking of taking TOEFL and GRE in the future". This pointed again to a mainly instrumental orientation, an impression reinforced by this interesting extended metaphor: "English is already a tool in my hand, but not an instinct from my mind" (Shen\_E). His utilitarian notion of English had not changed. In this embryonic form, however, the comparison also hinted at the hope of a future when English becomes a real part of him, and not just an external implement in his hand. This could be an indication that the possible early integrative dimension was still present in Shen's motivation despite the strong instrumental motivation.

Different from her four counterparts described above, Chu displayed both instrumental and integrative leanings early in her first year in NUS. For instance, Chu loved reading unabridged versions of the Harry Potter series even while she was in China although she found them expensive to purchase. In the following excerpt from her diary entry 1, she indicated both the instrumental and integrative in her motivation: "But it is worthwhile because it gave me confidences as well as lots of new words! . . . reading English books is far beyond a means of studying English but a way to enjoy myself" (Chu\_D). On the one hand, she read to expand her vocabulary; on the other, she found pleasure in the fictional community depicted in the series. The instrumental appeared to have the upper hand in the UDP, however. While still a freshman, Chu revealed that she was preparing herself to take TOEFL and GRE tests to fulfil her dream of becoming a research scientist. Moreover, to be ready for modules that required essay-type assignments, she planned to use her first university vacation to improve her English (Chu\_F). Interestingly, the combination of instrumental and integrative re-surfaced in her responses to the email interview. In the course of fulfilling the requirements of her UDP, Chu reflected that she needed to use English for many "reports and essays" as well as "projects and lab meetings". However, by the time she graduated she also felt she was "not afraid of talking with English speakers" but instead "enjoy[ed] doing so", an indication of the social and integrative dimensions in her motivation (Chu\_E). Thus, Chu quite consistently exhibited both instrumental and integrative orientations in her motivation.

A combination of instrumental and integrative was probably also present in Sun's motivation from the start of the BC. In her first diary entry, Sun's revealed her desire to learn by living including interacting with strangers to accomplish real tasks. She also found the BC and studying with her friends "enjoyable" (Sun\_D). Yet, she was also very careful in her planning to achieve her learning goals and to meet task demands for writing and speaking. A year later, she expressed her admiration for the directness and efficiency of English: "I enjoy learning English. It is very efficient language . . . English is very direct, ya. I like English" (Sun\_F). In the email interview, it appears that the integrative orientation had become more pronounced, judging by her growing acquaintance with Western cultures since the BC ("I learned more about western cultures") and her advice to an imaginary junior ("Another piece of advice is to make more friends. The friendship developed in this period is really precious and helpful."). However, the instrumental motivation was still present as

indicated by her exhortation: “You shall be self-disciplined and give yourself more pressure even though there’s not many serious tests within the bridging course” (Sun\_E). Thus, like Chu, Sun also consistently displayed both instrumental and integrative orientations in her motivation during her NUS journey.

I will conclude this sub-section with Wei, whose motivation appeared to have experienced many twists and turns. Wei’s diary did not allude to motivation directly, but it may be deduced from some of his learning strategies and experiences. At the start of the BC, he attempted to improve his speaking and listening by initiating nightly conversation practice with his roommates, as reported in his first diary entry. It was “free” authentic practice on topics they were interested in, like what they expected to receive from their girlfriends on Valentine’s Day. The words “fun”, “funny”, and “good” were used repeatedly to evaluate the experience. Wei also mentioned that he went from “embarrassment” to “more brave” (Wei\_D). Thus, although his motivation appeared to be mainly instrumental, this was arguably tempered by an affective dimension. Towards the end of the BC, he was engaged in a group research project. His evaluation in his last diary entry was again positive: “I think is rather interesting and challenging. I got a lot of meaningful and invaluable things through this experience, which must be beneficial to my later university studies” (Wei\_D). We may speculate that the motivation is, on one hand, instrumental, according to Gardner and Lambert’s framework (1972), with an eye to his future studies. On the other, Wei again mentioned the affective dimension: “I like this kind of study” and “began to like this English course” (Wei\_D). It is possible that this affirming learning experience may indicate or lead to a more integrative orientation.

However, in the face-to-face interview during the first year of his UDP, Wei seemed to have grown stronger in his instrumental motivation when he spoke of English learning as a matter of survival: “had to learn it because in the university all the lectures are given . . . given by English, so we have to learn it or we will [be] in trouble” (Wei\_F). This strongly instrumental orientation appeared to be a steady element in Wei’s worldview as reflected in his response to the email interview, “The official language here is English, so you must try to force yourself to speak, write, listen and read English. Otherwise, you may fail your exams or even fail your career later.” His advice to a junior just joining his UDP would be to read more books and prepare for GRE and TOEFL; the latter preparation would be “useful” for study and career (Wei\_E). It appears then that Wei displayed a strong lean towards the instrumental in his motivation during his UDP.

Yet, in the same email interview, there was possibly also an integrative orientation when he described his SEP learning experience thus:

[W]e have a lot of time to discuss with our classmates inside and outside the lecture room. We even have a weekly lunch time with our professor. . . . I made a lot of friends both from US and other countries. You know, I had a great time with them and also learned a lot from them.

(Wei\_E)

This possible integrative motivation was reinforced probably after he returned to NUS. During his FYP, Wei communicated “in English all the time” with his German FYP supervisor who was “very nice” and could “always forgive [his] bad English” so he “said a lot”, and his English “improved naturally” (Wei\_E). Thus, Wei’s motivation may be viewed as rather dynamic, shaped by his learning goals on the one hand and his responses to the learning environment on the other. Perhaps, he is an example of how positive engagement with the target community can have an impact on even a learner who remained strongly instrumental in his or her motivation.

Gardner’s model of motivation as an instrumental–integrative binary system does provide a meaningful lens to view the complexity of PRC students’ motivation in learning English. Most of the participants began with a mainly instrumental motivation to learn English for their academic purposes in an ESL and EIL environment and for their future career advancement. However, in the course of their BC and UDP, they increasingly found that English was an integral part of the community or world that they wished to integrate into, be it cultural, literary, virtual, or scientific. The only exceptions are Chu and Sun, the two female learners who seemed to have a more pronounced integrative orientation throughout their NUS sojourn.

### 5.1.3 *The motivated self*

While PRC learners in this study appeared to be influenced by the significant people in their lives, ultimately, they themselves shaped the growth and direction of their motivation. The data indicate that the students themselves were very much engaged in their English learning, conscious and proactive in their choices and actions. Because of this facet of self–motivation present in the participants’ responses, I decided to also pass the data through the lens of Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System (2010). The next paragraph is a brief review of this system.

Central to Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System are the Ideal L2 Self and the Ought-to L2 Self, with a third major component of the L2 Learning Experience (Dörnyei, 2010, pp. 79–80). The three components are summarised as follows:

- *Ideal L2 Self* is the L2-specific facet of one’s “ideal self”. If the self we aspire to speaks an L2, the “*ideal L2 self*” is powerful motivation for us to learn the L2.
- *Ought-to L2 Self* concerns the attributes we *ought* to possess to meet expectations and avoid undesirable outcomes.
- *L2 Learning Experience* concerns the situated motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience, such as, the impact of the teacher, the curriculum, the peer group and the experience of success.

When I analysed the data through the framework of Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System, the Ought-to L2 Self surfaced early in the diaries and face-to-face interviews when the participants were adjusting to their new learning context. In their first year in NUS, the learners showed concern that they fulfilled expectations and

avoided failure in the BC and the UDP. As I quoted the learners extensively in the sub-section on Instrumental-Integrative Motivation, it is probably not necessary to repeat the quotations here; instead, wherever useful, I will paraphrase or summarise their reflections and interview responses.

During the BC, Shen explicitly mentioned that he was careful not to fall behind others in his English learning, and thus he worked hard at memorising and using new vocabulary. Ping too was concerned to find solutions to overcome his problems with giving oral reports and writing essays. Sun also reflected on and monitored her writing and speaking during the BC so as to avoid pitfalls she had identified. When Qi perceived that his spoken English was weaker than his written English, he decided to seize every possible opportunity for practice. Writing also in his diary, Tang reflected that his progress was very slow at the halfway mark of the BC. Towards the end of the course, he expressed his severe shock on receiving an “E” grade for a progress test. Chu also lamented her “tiny progress in English” during the BC. In the first semester of her UDP, she became anxious about possible difficulties with her future modules with essay-type assignments. To pre-empt failure, she planned self-studies in English during the vacation. Wei was keenly aware that in NUS, his UDP lectures were given in English, so he had to learn it or he would be “in trouble”. Thus, there was indication that the Ought-to L2 Self was strong among all the learners.

These probable early signs of the Ought-to L2 Self were matched by the prominence of the Ideal L2 Self for some of the participants. As mentioned above, if we envisage our future self to speak an L2, the Ideal L2 self would powerfully motivate us to learn the L2 (Dörnyei, 2010). For Chu, she not only aspired to speak English, but she also desired to speak it in a native-like fashion. To listen and speak like a native speaker, she was willing to make much effort, for example, her experiment with “One-Breath” English (Chu\_D). In her freshman year, she was already planning to take GRE and TOEFL to prepare for postgraduate studies to become a research scientist (Chu\_F). All this affords a glimpse of Chu’s Ideal L2 Self where English would play a major role in her future life and imagined community. Another learner who manifested signs of an Ideal L2 self was Tang who had been goal directed from the beginning of the BC. It was always for progress that he strived: all-round improvement to the point that he could “think in English” (Tang\_E).

For Shen, he was interested in using English to “touch new knowledge, new informations, in the world” as well as “many interesting things” (Shen\_F). This early view of his Ideal L2 Self from the face-to-face interview was reinforced by his email interview response that he knew the importance of English “long time ago” and planned to take TOEFL and GRE in preparation for his future studies (Shen\_E). In comparison, Sun’s early Ideal L2 Self appeared to be relatively low key, as reflected in her diary: to write well and to speak fluently and to get a good grade. Similarly, for Ping, the realisation that oral presentations skills in English were required in his UDP made him willing to work hard on his oral reports during the BC. His Ideal L2 Self included the ability to speak confidently in public (Ping\_D).



Interestingly, some participants also mentioned their aspirations and ideals in other areas. Wei revealed that he very much admired Kaifu Lee, then “the technological manager” of Google. Most probably, Lee was the “very successful person” that Wei aspired to become (Wei\_D). However, his admiration centred on Lee’s philosophy of courage and wisdom in life rather than his achievement in English. For Sun, in the last month of the BC, she felt that the course was “dragging on”. To overcome this feeling, she reflected: “To live a happy and meaningful life, we need some challenges” (Sun\_D). This reflection hints at the Ideal Self for Sun: a life with challenges to make it fulfilling, which may or may not include English.

The Ideal L2 Self appeared to have persisted as a driving force for learning English well into the participants’ final year in NUS and beyond. This was gleaned from the data found in the email interview. By the time of Chu’s graduation, she felt she was “not very far behind from native English speakers”, indicating that she felt very close to attaining her Ideal L2 Self. Moreover, she had become less inhibited for her advice to incoming freshmen was to communicate in English without fear; intelligibility is what matters, not perfection. Sun felt she was past the halfway mark to her target as she could use English “freely in writing and speaking format” although she still had “a lot to learn” (Sun\_E). Thus, she seemed to be also close to attaining her early Ideal L2 Self, one who could speak and write fluently. In the case of Shen, his Ideal L2 Self could only be surmised from a metaphor he used to describe where he was in his learning journey: “English is already a tool in my hand, but not an instinct from my mind” (Shen\_E). Perhaps, he was looking forward to the future when he could use English instinctively, much like a native user. For Ping, his latter Ideal L2 Self still seemed modest: to be able to write more professionally (Ping\_E). At graduation, Qi felt that he had “quite a lot to learn” as he was still “far away from the destination” (Qi\_E). The remark, however, indicates the possible development of an Ideal L2 Self for Qi, which did not seem to be present in the early data. For Tang by his graduation, when he had attained the goal of thinking “naturally” in English, the goal posts had shifted to an Ideal L2 Self *articulating* [emphasis added] English fluently like a native speaker (Tang\_E). In the process of renting accommodation, he reflected that “we will be better off if we can speak Standard English.” He wanted to hear “from the other end of the line ‘I though[t] you were from U.S.’” (Tang\_A). Thus, TC’s ideal L2 Self had an American accent. How the above learners envisaged their Ideal L2 Self appeared crucial for the development of their motivation in learning English. The participants’ Ideal L2 Self probably became the goal that determined the path for their learning journey.

Interestingly, Wei seemed to respond differently again from the rest of the participants in terms of his later Ideal L2 Self. In the email interview, he appeared to have remained focused on an ideal self rather than an Ideal L2 Self. This was gathered from his advice to juniors to read “all kinds of books”, which would be very helpful for friendships and careers. They should also prepare for GRE and TOEFL to train not only their English skills, but also their logic and perseverance. In all, each should become “knowledgeable and a better person” (Wei\_E). This ideal, however, might still have been helpful to his English learning journey.



The third aspect of Dörnyei's motivational self-system, their L2 Learning Experience, appeared to be also critical in motivating these PRC learners. Dörnyei included the learning environment and experience, such as the influence of teachers and peers, the curriculum and the experience of success, within the meaning of "L2 Learning Experience". Some of the learners found the NUS environment itself to be nurturing. Shen felt that English was an integral part of his life in NUS: "It's so useful in our daily life, we can't do without it" (Shen\_F). Sun also perceived that she was in a near immersion environment where "almost anything written down is in English". For her, the motivation to learn was all around her: "If you are careful and pay attention . . . you will learn more and live better" (Sun\_D). Moreover, she was motivated by her congenial SM3 class and the progress she was making in the BC, so that she was using her "secondary language freely" (Sun\_D).

On the other hand, the curriculum and community of NUS was also motivating for the learners. The many aspects of BC compelled Ping, Chu, Tang, Wei and Qi to stretch themselves beyond their limits. In particular, they mentioned the oral reports and presentations, debates and essay writing. After he had understood the task demands, prepared hard and performed well for the oral report, Ping overcame his fear of public speaking and even enjoyed the task (Ping\_D). Chu found the effort for the debates "challenging enough but worthwhile" (Chu\_D). Likewise, Tang reported that the debates "forced" him "to learn and to practice, more motivated to" (Tang\_F). Wei found the research project "rather interesting and challenging", such that he learnt many "meaningful and invaluable things" through the experience (Wei\_D). Qi evaluated the essay component and found it "quite useful" and worthwhile; he had "spent a lot of time on it" (Qi\_F). Moreover, in their diaries and face-to-face interviews, Qi and Tang expressed appreciation for the encouragement by the BC teachers and the opportunities they created for the learners to speak in the classroom.

Their UDP curriculum and community also provided the impetus for these participants to improve their English. Lectures, tutorials, seminars, laboratory and workshop sessions were all part of the UDP curriculum. The class contact times would include and give rise to regular practice in listening, speaking, reading and writing in English. Moreover, essays, reports, presentations, tests, examinations and the FYP were required for the fulfilment of their UDP. Thus, we can envisage that the learners had no lack of opportunity to practise their English skills. On top of this, some of the participants went on the SEP or IP, such as Chu, Tang, Wei and Qi. Chu's response in the email interview may be a representative summary of most of the learners' L2 Learning Experience:

I had opportunity to speak English everyday. Practice makes progress. I am glad that my writing skills improved significantly as well. Probably I should be thankful of all the reports and essays I have written in the past five years.

(Chu\_E)

Chu alluded to speaking every day, indicating the interaction opportunities that she and the other participants had with their academic community, comprising mainly

their professors and fellow students. Hence, the L2 Learning Experience in the BC and UDP was probably critical for these learners' motivation to improve their English proficiency.

The motivation of these PRC students showed no lack of aspiration on their part. Their Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self and L2 learning experience together formed another facet of the motivation that drove their English learning. Thus, Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System provided a useful lens to view the motivated self of these learners. Moreover, the data indicate that this facet did not remain static but developed during their BC and UDP; there was growth from the Ought-to L2 Self expected of bright and conscientious scholarship holders to a greater apprehension of and investment in their Ideal L2 Self with all their aspirations. This was an incremental transition for the seven learners, one which helped to propel them further along their English learning journeys.

#### **5.1.4 Loss of motivation**

It would have been wonderful if the seven participants had kept up their motivation throughout the twenty four weeks of the BC. However, it would be unrealistic to expect nineteen- to twenty-year-old learners to have maintained their interest during the course without any dip. Four of the focal participants, Wei, Ping, Chu and Sun, reported some loss in motivation during the BC, while one participant, Qi, recalled a similar experience during his high schooldays in China. The remaining two, Shen and Tang, never broached the subject. For the first four students who experienced a fall in motivation, the reasons they gave were related to the BC in one way or another. For Qi, the causes had to do with his belief about grammar and with his interests.

One reason repeatedly given for the drop in motivation was boredom with the BC. Two months into the BC, Wei reported in his diary that he felt under-challenged to be studying only English five days a week: "Sometimes I feel very bored to learn English. We study many courses like math and computer in our last university. . . . However, now, there is only English. I feel my brain is getting dull" (Wei\_D). Ping expressed similar sentiments but only towards the end of the bridging course: "I suddenly find my life here, in Singapore, is quite quiet, just like a pool of still water. . . . Why? No pressure. . . . I enjoy this kind of life but I prefer a more challenging one" (Ping\_D).

The pace of the BC in comparison to the students' previous EFL experience was also a contributory factor to demotivation. At mid-course, Chu's nostalgia for the NOS and her disappointment with the pace of the BC led to a sense of lethargy and boredom: "I miss the NOS . . . I feel boring because of the slow pace of the BC and . . . tiny progress in English" (Chu\_D). Another learner, Sun, also felt "very tired" towards the end of the BC, as it was "dragging on . . . becoming a routine". Her loss in motivation was aggravated by the lack of a concrete goal such as "a major exam" (Sun\_D).

It is apparent from the data that the BC learning experience was not mentally stimulating at different stages for different students, due partly to its length and pace,

and partly the contrast with the very competitive curriculum that these PRC students were used to. This latter curriculum prepared them for the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) or *Gaokao*, which was capable of “making boys into men”, according to one former PRC student.

For Qi, he lost the motivation to learn English during senior middle school because his teacher, Mrs Z, emphasised grammar. Since he thought that “grammar is not vital for English learning”, he resisted learning in her class. He continued to learn on his own through the methods of transcribing and reading aloud, which his teachers in junior middle school had modelled. His motivation for doing assignments also depended on the appeal of the topic. He resisted those he was not interested in but was willing to “spend hours” on those he found appealing. This resulted in tardiness and even non-submission of assignments, and worst of all, “extreme weakness in English” (Qi\_D).

However, all is not lost when Chinese learners exhibit a loss of motivation. Wei, Ping, Chu and Sun seemed to recover from that temporary period of demotivation during the BC and continued on their learning journey during their UDP. The dip in motivation during the BC did not seem to affect their English learning then.

The above finding on motivation lost and regained aligns with previous research: ventilating one’s frustration or boredom with a course was the right “damage control” strategy to cope with temporary loss of motivation. Ushioda (2001) studied twenty students who took French as a second language at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland, to examine “what patterns of motivational thinking seem effective in enabling them to take control of their affective learning experience and to sustain their involvement in language learning” (p. 122). Noting that learners need to manage “periods of tedium, frustration, stagnation, pressure” as “an inevitable part of the long and arduous process of learning a foreign language,” she suggested that learners’ beliefs were crucial in limiting the motivational damage and sustaining learning involvement. “Once learners start blaming themselves for the loss of interest and negative affect . . . they run the risk of believing that they are no longer motivated or able to motivate themselves.” However, if the responsibility for their motivation was mentally projected onto “external causes (for example, the conditions of institutionalized language learning),” it is possible for the learners to “dissociate the negative affect they are currently experiencing from their own enduring motivation” (p. 121). This was exactly what the students in this current study did: they “blamed” the BC system for their temporary loss of motivation so that they could bounce back later, believing that they themselves were never really demotivated. This was possibly an affective strategy they adopted to manage their demotivation. Thus, boredom with learning was yet another transition for most of the participants in their learning journey. However, it did no great damage to their motivation as it appeared that they knew how to manage this slight setback by using affective or metacognitive strategies. For instance, Ping encouraged himself with a positive stance on the future: “I expect the stirring university life :-)” , the smiley face icon underscoring the affective strategy he adopted (Ping\_D).

## 5.2 Identity, agency, investment and empowerment

While the notions of motivation in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) were a useful beginning to investigate the English learning journeys of the PRC students in my research, I also found resonance in the notions of learner identity in social contexts. For this section, I based the analysis of my findings mainly on the framework and definitions of Norton's 2000 work, *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change*. The notions of identity, agency and investment in this framework were another helpful lens for the description of the seven focal participants' learner characteristics and transitions.

Norton (2000) uses the term *identity* "to reference how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 5). This definition is very apt for the focal participants who discoursed on their sense of who they were in their different learning contexts and over time, including projections into the future. How they managed their learning journeys, often in a deliberate fashion, also revealed their human *agency*, another notion put forth by Norton, (p. 3). As agents, learners are active in the construction of the terms and conditions of their own learning, and *agency* provides the motive and significance that link *investment* to action. The notion of investment "conceives of the language learner as having a complex social history and multiple desires" (p. 10). The assumption behind this notion is that learners are constantly "organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world" (p. 11) in their interactions with target language speakers. "Thus, an investment in the target language is also an investment in the learner's own identity, an identity that is constantly changing across time and space" (p. 11). In addition to the notions of identity, agency and investment, one more concept from Norton (2000) that surfaced in my data analysis was *power*. Norton uses power in the sense of "socially constructed relations among individuals, institutions and communities through which symbolic and material resources in a society are produced, distributed and validated" (p. 7). The symbolic resources may include education, language and friendship, while their material counterparts include money, capital goods and real estate. This inclusion was necessitated by the finding that the participants felt empowered or otherwise at various points in their learning journeys.

### 5.2.1 Identity

For the seven focal participants, how had their learner identities been impacted in their transition from China to Singapore? What stayed the same, and what changed in nearly five years spent in NUS? As I sifted through the data on their identities, I decided to present the findings on each learner separately as each is a unique individual. In the latter half of this sub-section, however, I am able to present the findings on one commonality which is their future selves in an imagined community.

About midway in the BC, Wei's identity as a competent learner seemed to have suffered a setback through the loss of his sense of control over his learning. He lost

his initial spirit when he became “disappointed and perplexed” with learning only English for weeks on end: “I often feel *very void and powerless* [emphasis added] after a day’s learning. . . . I can’t enjoy the feeling of substantiality again when I was in my last university” (Wei\_D). However, in the next diary entry, he showed he did not remain dispirited; there was a sense of recovery and an effort to reconstruct his learner identity. He looked to Kaifu Lee, then of Google, for inspiration to deal with his bewilderment and resisted being constrained by circumstances. In relation to his choice of UDP, he reflected, “My score in the National College Entrance Examination is not high. . . . [I]t is very difficult for me to be admitted to a good major. This is a reality that cannot be changed, *but I don’t want to accept it* [emphasis added].” He encouraged himself with his hero’s motto: “Lee also said that ‘do as you like.’ Maybe the major I like is not very popular . . . but I have interests in it. . . . I don’t want to learn a subject that I don’t like for four years” (Wei\_D). Thus, despite his predicament, Wei asserted his agency to construct his identity.

At the beginning of his NUS career, Ping viewed his identity from different angles. First, he was conscious of his privileged status: “As a lucky scholar, I am not care about exams, university and money.” But he was a little uneasy about his life of ease: “I enjoy this kind of life but I prefer a more challenging one” (Ping\_D). He also revealed that, during the BC, he was self-conscious about speaking English because of his identity as a male with an affinity for computers: “Speak for a long time is very challenging because I am a guy and use to think using computer logic” (Ping\_E). However, he had transitioned from a mere learner to a real user of English by the end of his first year in NUS. This was how he described his learner identity: “my English is not good but I’m quite proud that I can understand what the professors are talking about” (Ping\_F).

In the email interview, Sun was quite candid about her identity change from an EFL to an ESL learner. She evaluated her progress thus: “English is totally a foreign language for me before the bridging course. After it, I get used to it already” (Sun\_E). This was a rather unexpected transition as Sun had appeared quite firm in her identity as a learner coming from a “proven” Chinese ELT tradition. For she suggested in her diary that something was missing in the BC curriculum and should be included: the recitation of texts as a learning strategy. She also seemed to live out the spirit of “joy in effort”, which is one characteristic of the ideal Confucian scholar in the TCCL (Gu, 2003). She gave further evidence of this identity in her diary: “[W]e can learn by living, and enrich our lives by improving English and both of processes are quite enjoyable” (Sun\_D). Sun also apparently identified closely with the Chinese students who had gone through the gruelling *Gaokao* system; they had all made a huge investment in effort for admission to a good university (Sun\_F).

Among the seven participants, Qi was the most philosophical and poetic. His diary was devoted almost entirely to reminiscences and ruminations rather than to his English learning in the BC. He appeared to be on a quest to make sense of the past in order to construct his identity for the present (that is, his new context in NUS). He traced his earliest memories from childhood: the old cave dwelling, his

keen interest in poetry and poets, his English teachers, his close friend, his grandparents, and finally his parents. Qi conveyed a dual view of life and relationships: life is paradoxical but not without hope. His parents' traditional, probably arranged, marriage in a patriarchal family setting and their tempestuous relationship had a great impact on Qi's life. His new identity as a NUS BC student might have offered some relief from his former identity as a child growing up in difficult circumstances.

In the face-to-face interview, Qi expressed a wish to balance the pragmatic side of life with spiritual input, but he was aware of the limits: "I'd like to choose some [modules in] literature or philosophy . . . but cannot be all. . . . I think some spiritual things, because daily life is very busy." Qi was unequivocal that his Chinese cultural identity still impacted his learning of English: "I think I am too traditional, I cannot or don't want to accept the culture of English, so I found myself difficult to . . . learn English very further or profound" (Qi\_F). There was apparent resistance to modifying his cultural identity despite moving into a new cultural context. Thus, it was a surprise that, in the email interview, Qi offered this advice to an imaginary freshman: "Mentally value this opportunity to study English" (Qi\_E). Despite his resistance to English culture in his own freshman year, over time, he seemed to have accepted English and its culture as part of his identity. It was possible that there was ongoing identity construction in Qi's life.

Tang's first diary entry during the BC revealed that he was considered the best student at reciting texts in his junior middle class. This identity sustained him in his daily efforts. "[I]n order to save face (although my teacher thought I was the best, and I thought the same), no only should I memorize the whole text, but also should recite as fluently as possible" (Tang\_D). His pride ("face") of being the best student was at stake if he failed to live up to expectations. Thus, during the BC, this identity took a beating when he received a near-fail grade for his English essay test. The traumatic experience shook his identity to the core of his being as reflected in the title of his diary entry, "An E in composition part I got" (Tang\_D). He drew upon affective strategy, however, to recover from this setback in his identity. Later, in his UDP, Tang identified himself as a member of the academic community and a serious student of Physics, immersing himself in its culture (Tang\_E). Thus, Tang also continually constructed his identity during his NUS sojourn.

Despite the variation in the identities assumed by the focal participants as illustrated above, there is a commonality about an important aspect: they were driven by a vision of their future selves living in an imagined community. According to Norton (2001), learning trajectories can include communities of the imagination, "what could be called imagined communities" that transcend time and space (p. 164). Thus, agency and investment are applicable not only in the learners' current context but also in the future, imagined one. In other words, learners may be members of multiple communities: classroom, target language and imagined community. Four of the focal participants alluded to this imagined world quite extensively: Wei, Shen, Chu and Tang.

At the end of the BC, in evaluating the task significance of the research project, Wei wrote this in his diary: "As a whole, I got a lot of meaningful and invaluable

things through this experience, which must be beneficial to my later university studies” (Wei\_D). This reflection shows that he had his eye on the future when he would need certain language and research skills as an NUS undergraduate. His investments in his imagined community seemed to have paid off as Wei had done well enough in his UDP to be admitted to a direct PhD programme.

For Shen, his imagined community went beyond the walls of NUS to the whole, wide world. In his face-to-face interview in his first year at NUS, he said:

I think English is widely used now, and if we don't know English, we can't touch new knowledge, new informations, in the *world* [emphasis added], and besides, many interesting things are in English . . . if I learn English better, I can have more achievement in many aspects, like academic, business, and so on.

(Shen\_F)

His future ideal self in his imagined community is probably that of a high flyer in either the academic or business world. Shen enrolled in a PhD programme at Johns Hopkins University after graduating from NUS. Perhaps, that was his effort to achieve his Ideal L2 self in an “English society full of English culture and history”, so that English will become “an instinct from [his] mind” (Shen\_E).

Another high achiever and PhD candidate, Chu, was also concerned over her competence in English as reflected in her diary: she was frustrated that her speech gave away her Chinese national identity too quickly. Thus, she sought different methods during the BC to approach a standard English accent. The significance of her imagined community became clearer when she revealed that her “dream” was to study in an English-speaking country like America and to become a research scientist. When she evaluated her English learning near her graduation, she alluded again to her imagined community; it is apparent that it was inhabited by native speakers and others who can speak English fluently.

I think I am mid-way, but not very far behind from native English speakers. . . . [H]ow envious I was when I looked at those overseas Chinese on TV who could speak English fluently. . . . [I]t seems so sudden that I become one of them.

(Chu\_E)

During the BC, Tang alluded to his desire to “think in English rather than Chinese” and to use “live vocabulary” (Tang\_D). It might be his effort to make the crossing to becoming a “real” user of English. Later in his UDP, he seemed to also move towards an Ideal L2 Self with native speaker speech. This move towards an imagined community of native speakers became quite clear in his autobiography. After graduation, when he made telephone calls to rent a room, he was mistaken as an Indian or a Frenchman. While he was glad that he was “gradually getting rid of Chinese accent”, he stressed that he was not “in denial of his race, nationality or identity . . .

I feel proud of being Chinese, for we are diligent people” (Tang\_A). However, he elaborated that he envisaged being recognised as speaking with an American accent on day. Thus, we are presented here with TC’s vision of his future self and imagined community.

Thus, the Chinese learners in the study went through various transitions in their learner identity in their new learning context in NUS. However, they had the common characteristic of looking to a future imagined community from which they also derived one of their identities, whether it is a successful graduate, a high flyer in the academic or business world, a research scientist in an Anglophone country or a Chinese who speaks fluently with an American accent.

### 5.2.2 *Agency and investment*

All the participants demonstrated agency in the management of their learning journey as well as investment in terms of time, effort and strategy. Let us begin with two participants, Ping and Qi, who did not allude much to their investment in their diaries or interviews; they were the same participants who preferred a natural approach in the choice of learning and practising strategies. Yet, they demonstrated agency and investment in what they did. Ping took an active part in the debates and seemed to revel in his success: “[W]e lost but my friends said I did quite well” (Ping\_F). This out-of-character engagement was quite unexpected of him as shown by his own and his mother’s surprise, but it demonstrates the agency and investment on Ping’s part when he became inspired by a certain activity.

For Qi, his agency was mostly seen through his resistance to what he was not interested in and his investment mostly shown through his efforts on what interested him. He resisted the methodology of his senior middle school English teacher because she taught in English and emphasised grammar. He wrote in his diary: “Because I could not follow her English and I had got the viewpoint that grammar is not vital for English learning, . . . I gave up to listen to her lessons” (Qi\_D). Qi also gave a detailed explanation of how he decided on his investment which made me think of him as the proverbial free spirit; he followed mostly his heart in his choices:

My perception, which i follow to deal with almost everything, resisted the topics i was not interested. There are only two alternatives for me: try my best to do the assignment or do not write it at all. I do not like go through the motions.

(Qi\_D)

Turning now to Wei, during the BC, when the SM3 students were housed in the same hostel, he suggested to his roommates to speak in English from 8 to 10 nightly to “create some chances to practice” outside of the classroom (Wei\_D). There was clearly agency and investment in this effort. He also exercised agency when he decided that collaborated learning could be a significant help in learning: “I also



learned the importance of cooperation thoroughly. What one person can not do, maybe two or more people can” (Wei\_D). Moreover, he continued to invest his time in strategies that he preferred. Referring to the Self English Learning Facility (SELF) of the Centre for English Language Communication, he said: “Ah, SELF. I can choose what I like what I dislike” (Wei\_F). Wei also displayed agency and investment in his future identity; he revealed in the email interview that he planned for his future postgraduate studies, while still in his UDP, by preparing for GRE and TOEFL (Wei\_E).

Shen, in his diary, revealed that it was his mother who started him on his English learning journey; he responded by studying hard. However, the first instance of his own agency and investment was demonstrated after he was praised by his junior middle school teacher: “From then on, I did nearly perfect in her class.” He did not let up in terms of time, effort and strategy since that time as demonstrated by his persistence and diligence:

I insist [persist in] the habit of reciting English words and phrases from junior school to senior school and gradually my mother no longer checked me. . . . Sometimes words are not so east [easy] to recite so I had to face the words for several times before totally acquainting with them.

(Shen\_D)

Having caught his mother’s vision of the significant role of English in the world and in his future life, Shen was willing to work relentlessly in his chosen strategy of memorising vocabulary. He brought to the BC two dictionaries for CET4 and CET6 and read ten pages each day for half to one hour before class. By mid-course, he had mastered most words for CET6 and started on TOEFL vocabulary. His dedication demonstrated remarkable agency and investment.

Yet another learner who revealed a heightened sense of agency and a substantial amount of investment was Chu. Even while in China, she was willing to expend time, effort and money on the learning English. She was exceptionally diligent in preparing for *Gaokao*: she did five reading exercises per day versus the norm of two for other students. During the BC, she invested much time and energy in fulfilling her tasks. For the oral report, she pondered over the task demands before deciding on the best way to present her content. On her own, she used radio broadcasts, CDs, computer software and reading texts daily to help her memorise words. She felt she had to take action or she might “waste the whole course” (Chu\_F). This sense of agency was followed by investment which provided her with the additional practice she aimed at. In seeking different methods to acquire an accent close to standard English, she made huge investments in time and effort: “But all the pains are worthwhile if I can speak more naturally” (Chu\_D). Agency and investment were shown in her response to each learning context, whether it was in China or in NUS. By the end of her UDP, Chu had become a confident communicator not bound by concerns with grammatical correctness nor her fear of losing face.

Sun, also demonstrated considerable agency and investment in her efforts to achieve her goals and to develop her new identity as an ESL speaker. Already in her first diary entry, she reflected her agency in asking strangers for directions and successfully accomplished her task. She later reflected on how she could make full use of opportunities presented by her ongoing, informal learning context. Her agency was underscored by her assertion when boredom set in during the BC: “I can do something to make it [life] interesting, meaningful and even wonderful! I have seen the bright side of my present life, I find that it is worth living” (Sun\_D). Sun was also an independent learner who preferred autonomy, demonstrating her agency: “I prefer to learn on my own. . . . I would like to decide what to learn and how to learn” (Sun\_F).

Although unassertive by nature, Tang strove hard daily to maintain his junior middle school class position as “the best” student in recitation (Tang\_D). That was an early indication of his agency and determination. During the BC, he first surprised me by taking an active part in the debates. Yet another trait that was unexpected was the autonomy he preferred in managing his learning when given the choice. He valued independence and enjoyed help and collaboration only when group work was well-organised and focused, with all members doing their part.

Around the end of his UDP, Tang showed that he had been mulling over the questions of motivation–investment, agency–significance in English learning for some time:

I have met PRC students from previous batches. . . . I see people from my own batch . . . evolved into different levels of English. We receive similar education but get different results. So I ask what make the difference. It is almost always true that those who do well are proactive and dedicated. I figure that down to fundamental, they have been motivated to enter the doors by themselves.

(Tang\_E)

This taking thought itself reveals Tang’s agency and investment in English and in his own identity. He had transitioned from being a learner and user, to becoming a deep thinker.

### 5.2.3 Empowerment

As mentioned by Ping, the seven participants were among their cohort of privileged scholars, with a proven record of academic prowess evidenced by *Gaokao* results and admission to the top universities in China. In NUS, many Chinese scholars regularly make it to the Deans’ List of their respective faculties or schools. Thus, more likely than not, these learners are looked up to by their fellow students. In terms of ethnicity and language, these scholars are of Chinese descent and bilingual in English and Chinese, which is a close parallel to the ethnic and linguistic profile of many local students. Thus, there are no concerns, theoretically, for these scholars on the issue of power in language learning as discussed in Norton (2000).

However, the data reveal the fact that the participants did concern themselves with the issue of empowerment, mostly about speaking “freely”. Yet, I perceive

from the same data that this empowerment was as much a function of their own agency as that of rights granted by others. In their first year in NUS, some of the participants had alluded, in their diary or the face-to-face interview, to a sense of shame for not speaking English well enough according to their own perception. They also reflected their frustration at the lack of opportunity to speak English with the local community who often responded to them in Chinese. However, during their UDP, there was no lack of opportunities in the course of daily engagement during the curriculum or with the community. Eventually, most of the participants felt empowered by themselves and by others to speak “freely”. Let us now hear how they themselves expressed this transition in their learning journey.

Ping revealed in the email interview that he started the BC with the identity of a “guy” who was used to thinking in “computer logic” so speaking at any length was “very challenging” for him. From this self-limitation, however, he progressed to the point when he could “communicate with people freely; no shame due to mistakes”. Overcoming the previous sense of identity as a reticent “guy” and of shame over his “imperfect” English, Ping had learnt what self-empowerment was about (Ping\_E). This was a huge transition.

Qi, on the other hand, had started with a strong Chinese cultural identity. He mentioned his concern during the BC: “I think I was not very confident to speak English, I was always worry that people may laugh at me because of my heavy Chinese accent” (Qi\_E). But by the time of his graduation when he responded to the exit email interview, he could speak English “freely”. What or who had empowered him? First, it was a change in his mindset; he realised that if he could make himself understood, that was good enough for communication. Second, it was the opportunities offered by the NUS learning context that he made full use of: “I took up a lot of CCAs during the first two years university life when I was staying in hall. I think this helped me a lot to make this change happen” (Qi\_E). Besides Qi’s engagement with the community, the curriculum also contributed significantly to his empowerment. During his IP, he had to interact with vendors and contractors in English and over time, he developed in his confidence. Qi had come a long way from being trapped in his “heavy Chinese accent” to feeling free to communicate in English. What a sea change for this learner who in his freshman year resisted learning more of the culture of English and English itself (Qi\_F).

During his SEP, Wei enjoyed the “free and open” academic culture. It was liberating and empowering for him to interact frequently with both peers and faculty. For his FYP, he could communicate with his German supervisor only in English, and because the professor was accommodating in Wei’s perception, he felt empowered to speak “a lot”, and thus his English “improved naturally” (Wei\_E).

Another SEP participant, Chu, confessed in the email interview that her speaking and writing were below her own expectations at the start of the BC: “I had trouble communicating confidently and fluently.” But over nearly five years, she had improved “a lot” in her twin concerns of vocabulary and “the confidence to speak out”. The fear and shame of speaking English to strangers in public, which she had

recorded in her diary seemed to have evaporated: “I am not afraid of talking with English speakers and instead I feel I enjoy doing so.” She volunteered this explanation for the empowerment she experienced: “I had opportunity to speak English everyday. Practice makes progress” (Chu\_E). She then recalled the significant phases in her learning journey where the progress had taken place:

During the bridging course, I had many chances to speak in front of the whole class. It greatly helped build my confidence and courage. The overseas experience during SEP further helped me. With all native speakers around, I was forced to speak English more frequently and to be influenced by their accents and tones. In NUS, I also had many lab meetings to discuss problems with professors and lab mates individually or to present my results to the whole group.

(Chu\_E)

Thus, as much as she was empowered by the opportunities offered by the curriculum and the community, Chu also empowered herself by seizing the opportunities in her learning context.

Sun’s experience also seemed positive for she evaluated her progress as being able to use English “freely in writing and speaking format”. For example, she could “easily write an academic report or do a presentation”. Her explanation also touches on the opportunities afforded by the curriculum: “Yes, because we deal with academic English everyday, I get very familiar with it” (Sun\_E). Thus, the NUS learning context was an empowering one for Sun, while she also contributed to her own empowerment by exploiting all the resources available to her.

As for Tang, the empowerment he mentioned in the data had to do more with reading, listening and thinking than with speaking: “Now I am proficient in English reading and listening and even naturally think in English” (Tang\_E). This proficiency was the effort he made in relation to his identity as a Physics student:

I do philosophy and study the history of science in attempt to discover the secret of universe. And that motivated me to read a lot of philosophy and history books. And in the period of intense reading, I could really feel the improvement of my English language.

(Tang\_E)

Thus, it was apparent that the curriculum of the NUS context and Tang’s agency had contributed to his empowerment. Tang is a deep thinker, and among the matters he pondered was the disparity in English proficiency among the SM3 scholars. Furthermore, he linked the evidence he saw with the wisdom of Confucius in this maxim: “Teachers open the door, but you have to enter by yourself.” He postulated this possible explanation: those who were successful had been “proactive and dedicated”, and ultimately, these motivated learners themselves had to seize the opportunities to achieve their success (Tang\_E). And here in a nutshell are the

twin truths of empowerment as distilled through TC's reflection: the opportunities offered by others and one's context are only good when one exercises agency and makes the necessary investment.

### 5.3 Discussion

The findings presented in this chapter suggest that the motivation of the seven Chinese learners was multi-faceted and complex. They embarked on their English learning journey as (pre-)adolescents under the guidance of significant people in their family or in their schools. Their motivation was nurtured by their parents or teachers till the learners' Ought-to L2 Self, Ideal L2 Self and L2 Learning Experience came alongside to develop the motivation further. This motivation was mainly instrumental at the beginning of the BC, but being immersed in the new learning context of NUS and the Singapore community, the participants began to display small but perceptible growth in their integrative orientation. Despite temporary periods of demotivation, these Chinese learners showed themselves to be extremely motivated and admirably determined. They were certainly not the typical, passive TCCL student presented in the literature (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998). As individuals, the focal participants were continually constructing and reconstructing their identities. Moreover, the community which they belonged to or aspired to had a positive influence on the learners' learning journeys. The seven Chinese learners were empowered by their real and imagined communities, even as they empowered themselves through their agency and investments.

Let us now explore some of the rationale and implications of the key findings. To begin, why do parents and teachers appear to have such a significant influence on Chinese students' motivation towards English learning? One possible reason is Confucian philosophy on which Chinese cultural tradition is based. In the literature, we learn the importance of the hierarchical conceptions of relationships in Chinese culture. For example, children respect and obey their parents and teachers, while the authority figures exercise due benevolence for the welfare of their charges. However, a second possibility is the close-knit parent-child relationship of the typical, small nuclear family of modern China. This is how Shen depicted his mother's impact on his life: "My mother does have a strong influence on me in many aspects. . . . So when I was young, I was willing to obey my mother's instruction towards everything because I believe my closest person in the world would not cheat [deceive] me" (Shen\_D). He also described his all-out effort to excel in his English learning after his junior middle school teacher praised him for his good performance. Given the respect that Chinese students have for their teachers, teachers do well to look beyond the instructional aspect of their role and build on the goodwill and respect accorded to them in supporting their charges' learning journeys.

Another issue that may warrant attention is that of motivation lost and regained. Some of the focal participants experienced boredom with the monotony of learning only English over a long period. The lack of a "clear goal" in the form of a

major exam might also have caused them to feel demotivated. Happily, the learners in this study regained their interest and motivation to pursue their learning journey. What could be possible reasons for the recovery? Based on my experience of working with PRC scholars, most probably, the causes for recovery had to do with these young learners' motivation to succeed. Whether viewed through the lens of Instrumental-Integrative Motivation or L2 Motivational Self System, these learners were highly motivated individuals conscious of the need to fulfil the requirements of their BC and UDP. Qi, Tang, Chu and Wei were also inspired by their respective IP or SEP and FYP experiences. We may also surmise that their ongoing relationships with the significant others in their lives continued to encourage them onwards. It will be instructive for teachers to be acquainted with the likely causes of their students' loss of motivation. The knowledge might help to pre-empt or repair demotivation, especially where the contributory causes could be regulated or controlled.

What factors could account for the characteristic of a largely instrumental motivation among the PRC participants and for the apparently slight change in orientation towards the end of their UDP? These learners came from a background where they lived and learnt with the emphasis on exams from primary school to university. The fear of not doing well and disappointing their parents probably loomed over them for a significant part of their lives. According to Rao (2005), Chinese collectivist culture has resulted in socialisation for achievement which can have a highly motivating effect on Chinese students because success and failure affect not just oneself but the whole family or group. *Gaokao*, the National College Entrance Exam, decides not only their university placement, but probably their future as well. Moreover, the SM3 learners in my study carried the social identity of scholars recruited from the top universities in China. Their goal was to succeed in NUS. If they failed to do well in the UDP, that is, not to graduate with Honours and an excellent Cumulative Average Point, they would be deemed to have failed in many ways. To succeed, they need to have sufficient knowledge and skills in English to manage their UDP. Perhaps, this was what Wei meant during his first year in NUS that he had to learn English or he would be in trouble; four years later, his sentiments remained the same.

English was often referred to as "just a tool" by the focal participants. What is the origin of this expression? The mindset probably arises from the *ti-yong* dichotomy in the Chinese thought system (Orton, 2009, p. 93) which sees Chinese (the national language) as "*ti*", essence, and English (or any other foreign language) as "*yong*", utility (Gao, 2009a, p. 63; Gao, 2009b, p. 113; Lo Bianco, 2009, p. 42). This mindset has also been documented among children born to Chinese immigrant parents in the United States. Chiang and Schmida (2002) report that these children "create ideas and new thoughts" with English as it is the primary language in their life. Yet, they still speak of English as "a tool", thereby distancing themselves from it (p. 394). Even the well-known writer, Amy Tan, wrote, "I am fascinated by language in my daily life . . . the way it can evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea, or a simple truth. Language is the *tool* (emphasis added) of my trade"

(2002, p. 431). Thus, this utilitarian conception of English could be another reason for the mainly instrumental motivation among Chinese students.

On the other hand, what accounts for the small beginnings of a more integrative motivation? This might be the result of developing a more pronounced Ideal L2 self and of having a positive L2 experience during their UDP. It is possibly also a result of living for nearly five years in a real community with its diverse tapestry of socio-linguistic interactions. Thus, the mainly instrumental motivation of the participants gradually took on an affective-integrative dimension. Taking Wei as an example again, as an exchange student in the United States, he experienced a semester that seemed to have made a major impression on his outlook. He was using English for real communication with friends and enjoying it, and that had moved him along the cline towards a more integrative orientation.

The way forward pedagogically may be to gently nudge our Chinese students towards developing an integrative orientation while helping them to take advantage of their instrumental motivation. For, “the integratively motivated individual is one who is motivated to learn the second language, has a desire and willingness to identify with the other language community, and tends to evaluate the learning situation positively” (Gardner, 2001, p. 6).

In this chapter, we are also afforded a glimpse of the connection between community and identity. How the focal participants constructed their identities in their real and imagined communities impacted their agency, investment and empowerment in English learning. Even while they were members in their real community in NUS, they had begun to express their identity as members of their imagined communities; their sights were set on graduate studies, professional careers and Anglophone countries like the United States. And towards these studies and careers, they invested time and effort in their English learning. As teachers to Chinese students, we can support the learners in their identity formation by encouraging them to develop greater insights of their real and imagined communities. On their part, the learners need to exercise their agency and make the necessary investment for constructing their identities in these communities.

The relationship between the PRC learners’ identities and their imagined communities may need to be further examined. Gieve and Clark (2005) advocate the view that Chinese students in international settings should be seen through the lens of “fluid and multiple identities” instead of “a monolithic notion of personal identity” (p. 274). Only then can we rightly “allow for students taking on the attitudes and practices of different social and cultural groups simultaneously, contingently, instrumentally, flexibly”. Gieve and Clark’s view appears to find support in Teng’s (2008) notion of a hybrid identity developed by the SM3 students like the focal participants of this study. The implication for teachers may be the necessity for us to resist “locking” Chinese students into a single cultural identity in any given situation. Simultaneously, we need to guide the learners to expand their perspectives so that they continually construct their identities in different academic and sociocultural settings.

Taking a long-term view, how does their English learning journey and their participation in real and imagined communities shape the identity formation of

PRC students? Gao (2009b) commented that with English becoming an increasingly international language (EIL), it “is acquiring an ever more pervasive role in learners’ identity construction”. Moreover, the writer aptly sums up the seemingly dual identities of Chinese learners with the following observation: “in the context of globalization and glocalization, the productive relationship may typically occur between perceived membership of the native/local culture, on the one hand, and membership in a world community on the other hand” (Gao, 2009b, pp. 114–115). Indeed, the expanded identities of the seven focal participants were probably the result of their memberships in both their present/local and their future/imagined communities.

Thus, motivation, community, identity, investment and agency were interlinked as a complex of factors that propelled the focal participants forward in their English learning journey. These Chinese learners constructed their identities with twin empowerment: through the many opportunities offered to them and the ones they created for themselves. As summed up by Tang who reflected on the motivation–investment of PRC students: “It is almost always true that those who do well are proactive and dedicated. I figure that down to fundamental, they have been motivated to enter the doors by themselves” (Tang\_E). To make success possible for our students, teachers must ensure that the doors of opportunity are there, *and* the learners themselves must want to enter them.

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# 6

## AFFECT MATTERS

### Learners are propelled by the trajectory of their emotions

#### 6.1 Affective domain

When we recall that the seven focal participants were all scholarship holders recruited via a rigorous process from some of the best universities in China, we may tend to think of them as terribly cerebral beings. In attempting to study their learner characteristics and transitions as they journey through a university in Singapore, we may tend to focus on the cognitive and behavioural aspects of their learning, such as motivation, beliefs and strategies, and overlook the affective domain. That would be an oversight I would have made had I not worked with students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) since 1997 and noticed how much their feelings affected these students and their learning. Thus, I included the affective domain in my previous studies (Young & Fong, 2003; Fong, 2006) as well in the present one. In this chapter, we will focus on the affective domain of the Chinese learners and examine their trajectory from fear/unease to happiness, and from shame to confidence. Their learning journey affected their emotions; in turn, their emotions also impacted their learning journeys.

From the data presented in the diaries, the interviews, and the sole autobiography, I sifted out forty-five feelings mentioned or implied by the focal participants. Among these forty-five feelings, there were many synonyms and related emotions. Broadly speaking, these feelings can be divided into positive and negative feelings, but a further sifting yielded four finer categories: *Happiness*, *Fear/Unease*, *Confidence and Shame*. Table 6.1 presents a visual representation of this four-way division of the affective factors that were involved in the English learning of Chu, Ping, Qi, Shen, Sun, Tang and Wei. A particular feeling might have been cited by a number of participants and this is represented by the number that follows the emotion in the Table 6.1. Altogether, there were 98 citations of feelings culled from the seven

TABLE 6.1 Feelings cited by the seven focal participants

<i>Happiness</i>	<i>Fear/Unease</i>	<i>Confidence</i>	<i>Shame</i>
happy 9	fear	confidence 11	(a)shame(d) 5
enjoyable 7	perplexed	pride 4	embarrassment
exciting	void	courage	guilty 4
fun	powerless	hope	losing face 2
interest 2	shocked	independence 2	sorry
pleasure	anxious	boredom 4	deep regrets 3
warm 3	nervous		shyness 2
enthusiastic	reluctance		
satisfied	discouraged 2		
peaceful	desperate		
love	frustration 2		
	tension		
	worried 4		
	lost		
	disappointment 2		
	cynicism		
	resistance		
	turmoil		
	disbelief		
	dread		
	scared 2		
(11 items, 29 citations)	(21 items, 28 citations)	(6 items, 23 citations)	(7 items, 18 citations)

case studies. The number of items and total citations for each category are given in parentheses at the end of each column.

The four categories were first arranged in contrastive pairs: Happiness and Fear/Unease, Confidence and Shame. This arrangement turned out to be one in descending order of the number of citations for each category. Judging by the number of citations, joy in learning, fun, enthusiasm, interest and the rest of the “happy” feelings mentioned, seemed to have played the most significant role in the Chinese learners’ journeys. The students were happy when they were praised by others for good performance in their English learning, when they succeeded at a task, or felt they had made progress. Interestingly, fear was very close behind happiness in the number of citations: twenty-eight versus twenty-nine. The feelings of shock, anxiety, nervousness and the rest of the “fearful” feelings were probably not only resultant from the difficulties that the learners faced, but they also motivated the learners. Perhaps, this pattern resulted when the learners felt that much was at stake if they failed to advance in their journey (their Ought-to Self at work). When they did make progress, confidence grew, and independence developed. But once again, they might be weighed down by negative feelings as when boredom set in and they felt that the Bridging Course (BC) had become unchallenging. Also,

lingering in the background might be shame that held back the learners at times: shame at not being able to speak fluently, shame due to the fear of being laughed at and shame when identified immediately by their accent as PRC students. This sense of shame, or loss of face, was often manifested as shyness or passivity when they would rather not speak English in class or in public. However, generally, it was noticed that, as the participants moved further along their learning journey and grew in their proficiency, they also moved increasingly in the direction of happiness and confidence. We will now discuss the participants' reports on happiness, fear/unease, confidence and shame in turn, and the transitions they made along their learning journey.

### 6.1.1 *Happiness*

What would make learners happy and energise them in their endeavours? Praise and encouragement by others, especially their English teachers, appeared to have made an enduring and powerful impact as in the case of Shen, Tang, Ping, Chu and Sun. Shen recorded the following in his diary:

after a short oral quiz she [his junior middle school English teacher] told me that I was quite good at English and she encouraged me to be confident and went on studying hard. . . . I felt excited in my heart . . . couldn't stop feeling happy because there was no teacher before praising my English in the school. From then on, I did nearly perfect in her class and the English tests.

(Shen\_D)

Tang was likewise encouraged by his junior middle school teacher: "my teacher always praised me for my good work. Later she always asked me to recite to the whole class. . . . My efforts had not gone. I received a lot from reciting" (Tang\_D). In a similar way, for Ping, praise by his peers could be exhilarating. In referring to the debate activity during the BC, he said: "we lost but my friends said I did quite well. . . . I think it's exciting" (Ping\_F).

Happiness also appears to follow learning when learners successfully complete a challenging communication task, whether it is reading the original version of the Harry Potter series or talking to strangers during the BC. This was how Chu described the affective aspect of her achievement in reading:

I began to challenge myself by reading short original books. At last in Grade Three [junior middle three], I could read the Harry Potter and only had to refer to dictionary at times. I was so happy that I bought two Harry Potter books at once though they were very expensive.

(Chu\_D)

Similarly, for Sun, at the very beginning of the BC, she managed to get a document printed by speaking with strangers in English. "One of the most proud things that

I have done after I came to Singapore is that how I managed to print my first copy by communicating with people in English. . . . I was very happy” (Sun\_D).

Ultimately, the goal for their efforts was to become proficient in English. For Chu, this prize at the end of her transition through National University of Singapore (NUS) was within reach. She probably summed up how the other participants would have felt too.

During the past five years, I have improved a lot in English. . . . I am not afraid of talking with English speakers and instead I feel I enjoy doing so. I think I am mid-way [in my journey], but not very far behind from native English speakers. I feel very happy and satisfied.

(Chu\_E)

### 6.1.2 *Fear/unease*

When I think that these young people (most likely with their parents’ blessings) made the decision to transplant themselves from the familiarity of home, university and country into the strangeness of NUS and Singapore, I believe that they paid a high price, their scholarships notwithstanding. Much was at stake, not least close family ties, a secured place in one of China’s top universities and a reasonably bright future upon graduation. There was also much to adjust to academically and socio-culturally, possibly resulting in “learning shock” besides culture shock (Forland, 2006; Huang, 2012). After the novelty had worn off, fear or unease could set in due to what seemed unknown and uncertain in the way ahead, and this could have an impact on their learning journey. That was how Wei reflected in his diary twelve weeks into the BC: “Now I feel a little disappointed and perplexed. During this period of time, we were filled with English everyday. . . . I often feel very void and powerless after a day’s learning. I just don’t know what I’ve learnt today” (Wei\_D).

Similar feelings of perplexity and disappointment were expressed by Qi, Chu, Sun and Tang in the course of the BC, especially when they felt they were not making progress. For example, at mid-point in the BC, Qi expressed disappointment over his perception that his English was “too poor to be improved” but recovered courage later to persevere (Qi\_D). Chu wrote in her diary: “[W]hy do I still use the vocabularies I have been tired of using since high school? Why can’t I feel much progress in oral English? Why can’t I see much advancement in my writing skills?” (Chu\_D). Thus, the feeling that one was not making progress could weigh heavily on these young learners.

Just as successfully completing a learning activity could bring happiness, failing at a task or even dealing with one perceived to be daunting can be unsettling. Early in the BC, Chu described the oral report as a “torture” (Chu\_D) which engendered fear while Ping felt “shocked . . . anxious . . . nervous” that “such embarrassing performance would be a regular program every week because it was rarely request in China.” But after a successful maiden effort “with flying colors”, he grasped the task significance (Ping\_D). At beginning of the debates, Chu felt “desperate”

because of the motion assigned but became “more confident” after discussion with her teammates (Chu\_D). So the learners did overcome their fears to accomplish their tasks. This in itself was a valuable lesson for them that the challenges were surmountable.

Yet another negative affective factor was frustration which resulted from problems in communication. The feeling of being thwarted in their attempts to develop as effective communicators in English was especially trying for Tang and Chu. Frustration was palpable for Chu when she could not practise speaking English with the local community who quickly identified her PRC origins and responded to her in Chinese. She was also frustrated that she was not understood by others, and worse, when she felt ignored during seminars for not being able to articulate her ideas fluently and quickly enough. However, this sense of frustration propelled her to take action: to seize and create opportunities to practise speaking in English with other international students (Chu\_F). As for Tang, he had an “embarrassing or painful reminder” of his accent when he first arrived in Singapore: “[A]fter I spoke up for one sentence or two, local people could immediately tell my origin and always switched to speak Chinese” (Tang\_A). But for Tang, this was not the worst; his greatest worry was the fossilisation of his accent:

I am worried whether I can complete the journey in achieving full English proficiency as I realized that people’s accent becomes hard to change as they grow up. I feel more motivated than ever to improve my ability to articulate myself. And I wish I reached this point earlier.

(Tang\_E)

Thus, the fear of being unable to attain their ideal L2 self as a fluent speaker with a native-like accent probably made some of these Chinese learners uncomfortable. However, the good that came out of such fears was a greater determination to succeed, as exemplified by Tang’s assertion on motivation above of becoming a fluent English speaker.

### 6.1.3 Confidence

“Confidence” was the single most cited emotion (eleven times) among all the feelings mentioned by the seven focal participants in the data. As seen from the early diary entries, the learners had already begun to build their confidence in learning English while they were still in China. How did they go about this building process? The genesis of these young persons’ confidence was often found in the progress they made at the onset of their learning journey during their (pre-)adolescent years. The story continued to unfold as they developed greater confidence in the course of their junior and senior middle schooldays. When they began a new chapter of their life and learning journey in Singapore during the BC, the confidence continued to grow amidst the ups and downs, joys and fears that they experienced. At the end of their Undergraduate Degree Programme, all of them reported that they were more

confident, to varying degrees, than when they started their BC. A consistent phenomenon in this affective factor has overwhelmingly to do with speaking than any of the other skills. This suggests that courage and confidence are needed more for speaking English than for listening, reading and writing for PRC learners.

Starting with Shen, we are given a glimpse of the foundations of his confidence. He did not catch on to his English lessons during upper elementary school. His mother then engaged a tutor to coach him from the “basics” to help him catch up for junior middle school. He responded well and developed confidence to go on learning.

I thought I learned very fast and well and I could catch what the teacher said without much effort. Soon, I thought I nearly made up of all I lost in the primary school. . . . The most important thing was that I began to build my confidence in English from that time.

(Shen\_D)

It was a similar story for Chu who enrolled in a branch of the NOS. “I went to that school in my spare time. . . . I was full of confidence due to the rapid progress in English, thus finding great fun in learning English” (Chu\_D). Thus, making progress in her English proficiency early in her journey also contributed to Chu’s confidence. After she arrived in Singapore and joined NUS, Chu’s confidence continued to develop during the BC, her UDP and her SEP:

At the start of bridging course . . . my oral English was not so good. I had trouble communicating confidently and fluently. . . . I had many chances to speak. . . . It greatly helped build my confidence and courage. . . . During the past five years, I have improved a lot in English, not just the vocabularies but also the confidence to speak out.

(Chu\_E)

At the end of her UDP, Chu was not only confident, but she reported that she could enjoy her interaction with English speakers. This was a huge transition from having “trouble” at the start of the BC (Chu\_E).

Another learner, Wei, also emphasised the link between confidence and speaking, referring to the oral report during the BC. His progress and the resultant confidence had grown imperceptibly due to nearly five years of learning and using English in the NUS learning context:

I still remember the very first oral report, it was a disaster and a shame. Now, I am very confident to make any speech, especially academic ones. . . . There are a lot of presentations, projects, thesis to be done. You use English all the time and you must use it. . . . [G]radually, you will gain confidence and your English has improved without you noticing it.

(Wei\_E)

Thus, the learning context and the demands of the curriculum as well as the resultant opportunities had brought about the transitions in proficiency and confidence for Wei.

Although he did not mention confidence directly, Tang gave an idea of the comfort level he felt about English in this remark in the exit email interview: “Four years ago, I had limited vocabulary, little feelings of the language. Now I am proficient in English reading and listening and even naturally think in English. The cause . . . is years of experience of using English” (Tang\_E). Tang was reticent by nature so perhaps speaking was not something that came naturally to him, whether it was in English or Chinese. But for him to declare that he was proficient in reading, listening and even thinking in English speaks volumes about the confidence he had achieved in these other skills.

However, becoming confident in one’s English proficiency during the course of the BC may also have unexpected results. Sun mentioned the pride she felt at the sudden realisation that she was listening and speaking in her “secondary language freely” during one BC session (Sun\_D). Her confidence was also quite clear during the face-to-face interview; she gave this assessment of her proficiency: “I think I am not bad as a language learner” (Sun\_F). Her confidence was further underscored in her preference for learning with independence and autonomy, interest and pleasure. Confidence and independence were again evident in her assessment of her transition to an ESL/EIL learner during the email interview: she estimated that she was at the 60 percent mark of her English learning journey which was past the halfway mark in her journey (Sun\_E).

Interestingly, at first glance, shame seems unrelated to confidence. More accurately, we often think of the two affective factors as opposites. However, I was first alerted to the relationship between confidence and shame by Qi in his face-to-face interview response: “for most of the Chinese . . . it’s a shame maybe, if I don’t . . . can’t speak very good English, so I don’t want to speak, but the teacher may built . . . our confident. And this, I think, is very useful” (Qi\_F). For Qi personally, he was “not very confident to speak English” at the start of BC as he was “always worry that people may laugh at [him] because of [his] heavy Chinese accent” (Qi\_E). Yet, he revealed that confidence could be built if learners like him were given encouragement by teachers. Happily for Qi, he made the transition from shame to confidence by the end of his UDP. In the exit interview, it was gratifying to read his response to what has changed for him: “The change over these years is confidence” (Qi\_E). Thus, encouragement from teachers appears to be important to help Chinese students like Qi who might feel “ashamed” initially for not speaking “very good English” to make the crossing into daring to speak as they progress.

Following, Qi’s revelation, I picked up a similar signal from Ping in the email interview. Although he did not mention confidence in his responses, the following brief answer, regarding what he found most helpful about the BC or what was the greatest gain, indicated that he had become more confident: “communicate with people freely, no shame due to the mistakes in language” (Ping\_E). Embedded in this terse remark is the implication that he had felt shame or embarrassment in the



past due to the mistakes he made in communicating in English. However, happily for him too, he had overcome that shame.

#### 6.1.4 *Shame*

We had seen in the previous sub-section the shame that Qi and Ping felt when they made mistakes in speaking or when they felt they did not speak good English. Other participants also broached the subject of shame and the related feelings of shyness, embarrassment, guilt and regret, but without relating them directly to the issue of confidence. Chu was one who dealt with these feelings quite extensively in her diary and during the face-to-face interview. Moreover, she would often reflect on them from the angle of “losing face”. Her diary entry after her team lost their debate was one example:

Our team lost the debate because of me. In fact I don't care about the result and my losing face but when Ping felt very frustrated due to our failure I felt extremely sorry and guilty. . . . I'd like to express my deep regrets to my partners for the result again.

(Chu\_D)

The cause for regret for Chu was a matter of accountability to others. As she herself expressed it, losing an inter- or intra-class debate was “no big deal”, but for young learners from a traditional Chinese culture of learning background, this might have been a big blow. In the literature review, Ho and Crookall (1995) make reference to the Chinese concern with “face”. Particularly, when communicating with another person, one must protect the other's self-image and feelings. This might be why Chu expressed her regrets to her teammates in this instance.

She was also protective of her own “face” about speaking English in public to strangers. “I never have the nerve to speak freely without any consideration of what others may think about me. I am always afraid of losing face. . . . I haven't conquered my fear of losing face triumphantly” (Chu\_D). The matter of making a fool of oneself in public is probably a serious concern with Chinese students; it is rather face-threatening and humiliating to be seen as speaking badly. This reason may have prevented many of them from speaking English in class or in public.

During the face-to-face interview, Chu gave a possible reason for the shyness that many PRC students seem to display: “[M]ost students, they are quite shy to speak . . . especially in China, you don't have many opportunities. It's only when teachers ask you to answer questions, you will speak in English. Except that you don't have chance to speak” (Chu\_F). Thus, the lack of opportunities to practise speaking prior to arriving in Singapore might have made many students feel handicapped especially at the beginning. They feel shy about displaying what they perceive as their poor English and this in turn could have

hampered their progress in speaking. Until they overcome that shyness, their progress would be slow.

For yet another learner, Tang, the acute sense of shame which he expressed in his autobiography followed an encounter he had during his SEP in the United States. He met a Chinese waiter in a restaurant whose English sounded native-like to Tang:

I was greeted by a Chinese servant [server/waiter], in his 30s, who spoke in perfect American accent. . . . While I was eating, I heard him talking to his colleagues in perfect Chinese. And I reckoned he must have been in US since an early age. When prompted, he told me he had been US for only six months, putting me in wild astonishment. By then, I had been receiving English education for three years and spent nearly one year in US, yet my speeches were still frequently interrupted by “Pardon?” or “ah?” Needless to say, I felt terribly ashamed.

(Tang\_A)

Tang’s written English as reflected in the quote above is clear and succinct, displaying a certain sophistication in syntax and lexis. Yet, he felt “terribly ashamed” when he compared himself to the waiter in terms of speaking; he felt he had fallen short despite the comparative advantage he had in terms of exposure to English. But this experience also had a gratifying result for it spurred him to renew his efforts to improve his speaking. In fact, he went to extraordinary lengths to achieve his purpose, including his choice of project supervisor and his insistence of interacting only in English with his project team. Moreover, he renewed his efforts to learn English: “I have been paying more attentions to learning English. I dusted off learning English materials . . . I download podcasts from CNN, NBC. In Singapore, I turn on my FM radio to pick up the readily available BBC World Service” (Tang\_A). Indeed, I believe Tang’s efforts had paid off. In his autobiography, he came across as rather confident; what started as a negative feeling for him had led to a positive outcome.

The focal participants experienced a whole spectrum of both positive and negative feelings in their English learning journey, feelings broadly related to happiness, fear/unease, confidence or shame. While on the one hand, this affective dimension of the learners shows their humanity and vulnerability, on the other hand, it makes manifest their agency and determination. More often than not, as we have seen in the findings above, even the negative emotions were harnessed by the learners to attain their goals while they learnt how to manage these emotions. Affective factors were a significant driving force for these learners in transition. In turn, the affective dimension of their learning also underwent transitions, growing from fear/unease to happiness, shame to confidence as they developed greater competence along their learning journey. I represent this growth as an upward trajectory in Figure 6.1.

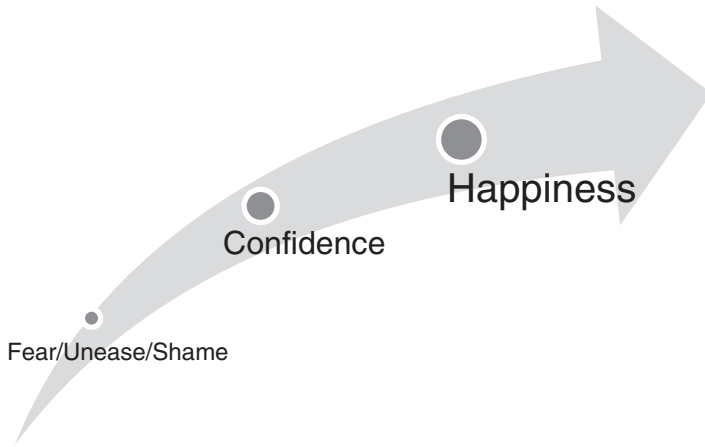


FIGURE 6.1 The affective dimension: an upward trajectory

## 6.2 Discussion

The role of affect appears to be an important one in the learning journeys of the seven focal participants based on the data they presented in the diaries, interviews and the autobiography. Altogether, ninety-eight instances were counted where feelings were mentioned or implied. During the analysis of the data, these feelings were categorised into four main generic emotions, *happiness*, *fear/unease*, *confidence and shame*, in descending order of the number of citations. Besides their presence, we can detect a trajectory of the affective factors, from fear/unease to happiness, and from shame to confidence, which propelled the participants' forward in their learning journeys. The Chinese learners were aware of the power of emotions and harnessed them to make their transitions from English as a Foreign Language to English as a Second Language and English as an International Language.

The first question we may explore here is the efficacy of quantifying the affective dimension in a qualitative study. I believe it is feasible to include an element of the quantitative in qualitative research where it is appropriate. The feelings that surfaced in the data appeared to be fairly discrete instances which could be easily counted. I decided to take a partially quantitative approach for this characteristic as I perceived that the numbers could demonstrate the importance of the affective dimension to the seven participants. That it featured prominently in their thoughts and expressions (with an average of fourteen citations by each participant) indicate that the feelings they experienced had a significant impact on their learning journey.

From the focal participants' reports on the positive emotions of happiness and confidence, we learn the importance of teachers' and others' affirmation. For example, Qi revealed that some students were "ashamed" to speak because they did not speak "very good English" but added that teachers could help to build confidence by their encouragement (Qi\_E). Thus, we may draw the implication that teachers

to Chinese students have an important role in fostering a more sanguine outlook in these learners. We may begin by promoting a conducive learning environment, for example, by not requiring them to speak before they are ready as well as providing opportunities and positive reinforcement for them to gradually develop the courage and confidence they need. This “safe” learning environment can be enhanced by our modelling of openness to students’ attempts until it is practised among the students to one another.

On the other hand, when our Chinese learners raise or manifest signs of negative affect, what action can teachers and curriculum developers consider? For example, some of the focal participants expressed boredom and discouragement when they felt that the BC was becoming monotonous. One possible remedy is to ensure that the students are challenged with more complex tasks and activities to help them stay interested and “hungry” to learn. Another possibility for teachers is to guide students displaying negative emotions, say, due to an apparent lack of progress, to use affective and other strategies to keep up their spirits. Especially when they are going through difficulties in their learning, students need to be aware that they can encourage themselves to persevere. When they become more proficient in their English learning, competence will reinforce confidence and vice versa. The focal participants’ trajectory of emotions indicates that they put negative emotions to good use so as to remain positive and to stay focused.

In the email interview, all the participants expressed greater confidence and happiness than they had expressed at the beginning of their journey. While this upbeat tone with regard to their emotions was not surprising, as it corresponds with the fact that they had all successfully negotiated their pathway through NUS, it still represented a transition for the learners. They had become more stable and more sanguine in the affective dimension as they gained greater mastery of the language and developed a higher comfort level in using it. The process is an important part of the learning journey to which teachers can draw the attention of their students, who can then learn to manage the fluctuations in their emotions.

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# 7

## EQUIPPING THE TEACHER AND THE LEARNER

### 7.1 The findings in perspective

In the foregoing chapters, we have discussed the most important findings of my study which indicate that the Chinese focal participants of the case studies *were* learners in transition from English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to an English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as an International Language (EIL). They carried with them elements of the traditional Chinese culture of learning (TCCL) but were active learners willing and able to adapt to the new learning context in the National University of Singapore (NUS). Working through the NUS curriculum and living in its related communities, these Chinese learners' beliefs, strategies motivation, identities and affective domain developed during their sojourn. However, some aspects of the learner characteristics had remained constant, chief among them the belief in effort for success which is a strong anchor in Chinese culture itself. Their motivation had also remained largely instrumental.

With the above perspective of the learner characteristics and transitions, let us also keep in view a holistic picture of Chinese students. First, these learners are unique individuals and not just an amalgam of learner characteristics undergoing transition. Second, although we analysed the seven case studies through the separate themes of TCCL, NUS learning context, beliefs, strategies, motivation, identity, agency, investment and affective dimension to tease out the commonalities in their learner characteristics, we need to remember that within their shared sociocultural context each focal participant has his or her own sociocultural history and personality. This is important to note so that we do not lose sight of the richness of the individual case studies. Third, the themes are not mutually exclusive, tight compartments. In fact, they are interconnected and act upon one another dynamically. Let us take one focal participant, Shen, as an illustration of this interconnectedness. In the following paragraph, the italicised words/phrases are meant to draw attention to the themes and sub-themes presented in the foregoing chapters.

Even in his first sociocultural and academic context, where *TCCL* had a pervasive influence, Shen was *motivated* to learn English well because he *believed* that English was important for his future; it would become a major lingua franca in the world according to his mother. She was a *significant adult* who set him on and nudged him along in his learning journey from pre-adolescence. Her expectation for him to eventually study in a university in the West probably contributed to the shaping of his *Ought-to Self*. He also perceived his *Ideal L2 Self* to be fluent in spoken English and masterful in the written form; hence, he worked diligently towards his *identity* as a member of his *imagined community*. At the same time, the *praise* by his English *teacher* in junior middle school *affected* him positively so that he exercised his *agency* to do excellently in this teacher's class. Furthermore, reaching senior middle school, he *invested* time, effort and money in purchasing dictionaries and memorising the vocabulary in them every day, enrolling in New Oriental School (NOS) and taking the tests for College English Test Band 4, IELTS and TOEFL. Thus, he employed *strategies* associated with *TCCL*; however, he also adapted them to achieve his own goals especially after he arrived in his new ESL and EIL *learning context in NUS*. The L2 learning experience did have a formative influence on his learning journey; he reflected that he was surrounded by English and it was very useful for his life. As he moved to Johns Hopkins University in the United States for PhD studies after completing his Undergraduate Degree Programme (UDP) in NUS, he seemed to reveal a desire to have English become a part of him, “an instinct” from his mind, and not just “a tool” in his hand.

## 7.2 Equipping the teacher and the learner

Equipping the teacher and the learner are two sides of the same coin. They are symbiotic parts of an ecological whole, so that teachers can better support their learners from the People's Republic of China (PRC) in ESL and EIL contexts, while the learners strive to achieve their own goals. In the rest of this section, we will delve into

- 1 What to expect of and how to support learners
- 2 What to aim for and how to guide goal-setting
- 3 What/how to teach and how/where to get help

### 7.2.1 What to expect of and how to support learners

What do we expect of PRC students, and how do we support these learners as they transition from an EFL to an ESL and EIL context in NUS, or any other English-medium university for that matter? In fact, in an increasingly globalised world, PRC students find themselves in increasingly multicultural and intercultural learning contexts. Tertiary institutions in the West and in Asia which use English as the medium of instruction are receiving increasing numbers of PRC students as we have discussed in Chapter 1. What do these learners experience and what do they need as they embark on their English learning journey and traverse the vast territory that

includes many of the following: bridging course/foundation level, undergraduate degree programme, student exchange programme/year out, internship programme as well as residential hall life, co-curricular activities, community living?

We learn from this study that PRC students are influenced by the traditional Chinese culture of learning (TCCL) to varying degrees. On the whole, we can assume that the students' beliefs and expectations, motivations, strategies, affective dimension and identities have been shaped by this culture although they are certainly not passive learners as depicted in the literature. They are active in exerting effort to select strategies, and critical about the curriculum and pedagogy of their learning contexts. Thus, keeping these two sides of the Chinese learners in mind, we teachers need to prepare ourselves for the characteristics of the Chinese learning culture in our students as well as encourage their active learning selves at the same time. We also need to adjust our own expectations in our interaction with these students, especially at the beginning of a Bridging Course (BC) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course, to help them make the transition to their new learning context. Bodycott and Walker (2000) argue that "reflecting on the identified aspects of cultural models allows us as teachers to design strategies to meet, challenge and build on the thinking of students" (p. 81). They urge rethinking on the part of universities, where the onus is often on the international students to adapt to the cultural context in which they find themselves. Instead, they propose that teachers develop "strategies that scaffold and enhance intercultural learning in their classrooms" (p. 92). Moreover, as Cortazzi and Jin (2013) advocate, "teachers – by recognizing positive features of their [students'] current learning cultures – can help students extend, adapt or adopt new approaches" (p. 2). Thus, when our PRC learners become engaged with their new learning contexts, they can be guided to continue in their learning through appropriate curriculum and relevant pedagogy as well as to receive support from their new community.

### *Beliefs and strategies: vocabulary learning and effort for achievement*

Based on my experience of teaching PRC learners and the findings of this study, teachers can expect many Chinese students to demonstrate their belief in the prime importance of vocabulary learning. At the beginning of the BC or foundation level EAP class, in fact, in the very first week, some students will probably request their teachers to provide lists of useful or frequently used words. They will probably memorise and review the vocabulary on such lists as it is the accustomed learning strategy in the TCCL context. The students may appear to equate proficiency with vocabulary mastery; indeed, they are right in their view to a certain extent. Vocabulary is critical as "lexical items carry the basic information load of the meanings they wish to comprehend and express" (Read, 2004, p. 146). Crystal (2009) has a similar view: "[V]ocabulary is the Everest of language. Memorizing the tens of thousands of words you need in order to hold your own in long conversations on variegated topics takes time" (p. 7). In exploring the pedagogy of an

English language teacher at a key university in an inland province of China, Lam (2011), found that the teacher, Yin, placed emphasis on vocabulary. Her emphasis and ideas on how to improve vocabulary were welcomed and praised by her students. Students coming from a TCCL background also firmly believe in effort for achievement. Many of them may think that “mastering” English is only a matter of applying themselves, and applying themselves may mean memorising, reviewing and reciting texts as their EFL experience is mostly a text-driven one.

Given the above actions springing from the learners’ beliefs and strategies, potential issues may arise for teachers. Some of us may equate memorising with rote learning, and therefore a “bad” strategy which we should discourage at all costs. Frankly, some of us may even find the expectation of vocabulary lists being handed out annoying. However, we need to manage these expectations and early actions carefully as these young learners are probably going through a difficult phase in their learning journey, having to adapt to many changes in their new learning context: academic, linguistic and sociocultural. Imagine ourselves suddenly surrounded by people who only speak our Second Language (L2) and having to function in that language for most of the day! Thus, for our PRC students, to hold on to some familiar strategy to help themselves adapt must seem a sensible course of action.

It may thus be best for teachers to take a two-pronged approach, at least in the beginning of the BC/EAP course. On the one hand, we need to initially accommodate and not over-react to the actions that accompany their learners’ beliefs; on the other, we need to encourage the learners to expand their beliefs and develop their repertoire of learning strategies. Certainly, it will not be helpful for them if we “yield to their demands” and leave them to find out later that the strategies of memorisation and review will probably be inadequate to cope with “the information flood” (as coined by Shen) in their UDP and careers. Thus, teachers need to guide the learners to realign their beliefs and broaden their strategies. We need to help them think of vocabulary as a means to an end in the overall scheme of authentic communication. Eventually, in their email interviews, the focal participants showed that they realised this fact when they focused on communication instead of being preoccupied with vocabulary. However, a word here about memorisation may be in place. This strategy associated with the TCCL is often criticised as surface rote learning, but it has proven to be effective when wielded by a skilful PRC student, as demonstrated by Shen who emphasised memorisation with understanding and application. The ability is an asset which teachers can do well to encourage and exploit together with the learners’ belief in effort. Thus, we need not throw out the baby with the bath water, but we can guide our PRC learners to turn their natural or trained abilities to good advantage, while building a bigger arsenal of strategies at the same time. Strategies that the participants of this study found useful could be introduced to our new learners as a starting point: reading, watching movies/TV, listening to the news and/or songs, using online resources and software, making friends with other international students, among others. Furthermore, we can introduce resources like concordances and Coxhead’s (2002) Academic Word List.



*Expectations: significant people and language use*

Significant others are important to the learners as the findings show. For these PRC students who are away from their family and in a new sociolinguistic environment, both teachers and peers impact their learning journey, academically, socially and affectively. Teachers' praise and feedback brought joy and encouragement to the focal participants. This finding will probably be true of other international students as well, but I submit that these PRC students are in a particularly fragile situation because of the cultural concerns of face and shame as mentioned by Chu, Ping, Qi, Tang and Wei. In their diaries and interviews, they alluded time and again to Chinese students' sense of shame for not speaking well and hence often their reluctance to speak. The mirror image to this sentiment is confidence when they were encouraged by teachers or had done well in a task. Therefore, let teachers give plenty of appropriate affirmation. Peers' feedback and cooperation also help learners to review and revise their performance and strategies. Chu, Ping, Sun and Wei alluded to being heartened by their friends' praise or a harmonious learning environment. Peer support in group work can lower the affective filter (Krashen, 2002) and improve motivation for the task. Thus, teachers should seek to build strong bonds in each group or class and encourage cohesive working and social relationships among students. All these would contribute to a positive L2 learning experience that is part of the Motivated Self system (Dörnyei, 2010).

Moreover, coming from a TCCL background and Confucian Heritage Culture, these students have certain expectations of teachers. We should not be surprised if our students look to us as paragons of knowledge (Fusheng & Rao, 2007) and models of dedication. Liang (2009) reveals that among the adages that influence him as a teacher is "to model noble character and profound scholarship for students . . . to proclaim the Way, to impart knowledge to students, and to counsel them". Thus, the teacher does not merely instruct but also nurture the growth of the whole person (pp. 168, 169). This is what the PRC learners may expect from their teachers even in a new learning context. We need to be prepared for the students' initial expectations of teachers responding to requests for help beyond class or even office hours; if not handled carefully, misunderstandings can arise as these students may see their teachers as "too busy and uncaring" (Edwards & Ran, 2009, p. 194). From my experience, such expectations, have to be graciously met at the beginning and then the students guided to learn the etiquette appropriate for their new learning context.

Yet, our students are increasingly influenced by a more global worldview and tend towards greater desire for autonomy. This is especially so when students in their new learning contexts are exposed to these views through the widespread use of the Internet and social media. Wang (2013) reported that while the current generation of students in China still value traditional modes of teaching, they also "want to establish a new and different relationship with teachers" (pp. 72, 73). Lam (2011) found that "Yin's students still see the teacher's role as central but they increasingly lean towards wanting a voice in the classroom" (p. 201). Shi

(2006) already found this to be true of the 400 junior and senior middle school students she surveyed in Shanghai. Thus, the teacher has to tread a fine balance; while their PRC students still look to them as a role model of knowledge and virtue, they expect to be given a certain degree of independence. The balance then is between providing guidance and granting autonomy. The learners will come to us for instruction, feedback, encouragement and advice and yet will want to have their voice heard. This was exemplified by Chu, Shen, Sun and Wei who commented on the curriculum and pedagogy of their learning contexts and suggested alternative approaches or improvements. A suggestion here is to regularly and judiciously adjust the guidance–autonomy balance as well as initiate regular discussions with students to gather feedback on the curriculum and pedagogy. A learner diary may also be an effective window to the sentiments and concerns of the students as it was shown in this study.

A related pedagogical issue is the matter of language use in the classroom: whether teachers should allow the use of Chinese and to what extent. There are differing schools of thought on this. On the one hand, communicative language teaching advocates communicating only in the target language to promote immersion and acquisition. However, according to Larsen-Freeman, “The meaning of the target language is made clear by translating it into the students’ native language” (1986, as cited in Lam, 2011, p. 197). For teacher Yin, one key reason to allow Chinese was to reclaim the students’ attention when necessary. About two-thirds of her students also agreed that the use of Chinese in class helped them: they could understand better the abstract terms and cultural differences (Lam, 2011, p. 201). To sum up, Lam cited Kumaravadivelu’s view that the judicious use of Chinese, instead of forbidding it in strict compliance to communicative language teaching ideology, may be attributed to a discerning teacher’s principled judgement (1994, as cited in Lam, 2011). Thus, teachers need to weigh whether, when and how much Chinese is to be used in *each* class and even with each student. For example, when a quick, direct translation can clarify a troublesome point or difficult concept, it should not be scoffed at. However, if a student or class is reluctant to use English, the teacher should find out the reason and then decide if allowing the use of Chinese is appropriate. At the beginning of the BC, I usually encourage shy students to try speaking more English by using a small amount of their mother tongue with them to establish rapport. I then share my own background of coming from a Chinese-speaking home and my experience of transitioning to using more English. I encourage them that if I could become bilingual, so can they. This strategy works most of the time; the key is to be flexible and sensitive. Students should not be made to feel “deaf and dumb” or even humiliated when Chinese is totally banned from the classroom, especially in the initial weeks, nor should they feel unguided when they are left to do as they please in terms of language choice and practice in the classroom.

To close this sub-section, I would like to underscore the significance of our role as teachers by recounting a nugget of advice I received at the 1999 Tokyo AILA Conference. Enthralled that I was in the presence of one writer whose ELT books I often referred to as a beginning teacher, I listened attentively to the late Professor

Wilga Rivers' responses during the Q&A session following her paper presentation. One thing she said resonated with me then and has remained with me to this day: ultimately, it boils down to your relationship with your students. I cannot recall exactly what "it" referred to, but there and then I had confirmation of my intuition and belief that establishing a good relationship with my students was very important for learning and teaching. This rings true when we work with our PRC learners who bring with them a certain respect for teachers who are significant people to them in their life and learning journey.

### 7.2.2 *What to aim for and how to guide goal-setting*

Having prepared the teacher for what to expect and how to support learners at the beginning of their learning journey in a new learning context, we now turn to the question of the destination they should aim for. Based on the findings and in the context of the BC, I would argue that the students should be guided towards striving for autonomy as learners, who set goals for themselves and who find the right mix of strategies to achieve these goals. The BC at NUS has been designed with the aim of helping the PRC students become more independent learners. Upon that foundation and with the learning opportunities that the BC had provided, the seven focal participants became increasingly more confident and proficient, and made the necessary transitions to become successful learners and users of English. It is hoped that this approach will continue to contribute to PRC students' autonomy in navigating their learning journeys.

#### *Motivation, ideal L2 self and imagined community*

To grow as autonomous learners, the PRC students need to have the motivation to set and succeed in their goals. Motivation is goal directed (Gardner, 2001), and therefore students must have motivation before they can sustain their language learning (Dörnyei, 2010). As presented in the findings, many of the participants retained a mainly instrumental motivation where English is a *tool*. However, possible indications are seen of tendencies towards a more integrative motivation where English is the channel of *communication* in an imagined community and a part of the learners' identity.

Instrumental motivation may suffice for students to fulfil course requirements and pass exams. However, if the PRC students are to become independent and proficient users of English, they should not limit themselves to an instrumental motivation or an Ought-to Self. They can be guided to develop an integrative orientation and an Ideal L2 Self in their own imagined community. When the students gravitate towards a target community of English speakers, socially and/or academically, they would probably desire to become integrated linguistically as well. To do this, their L2 learning experience, the third component of Dörnyei's Motivated Self system (2010) has to be positive. This leads us to considerations of curriculum, community, teachers, peers, affective filter and other facets of their L2

learning experience. From seeing English as merely a tool, they can move on to appropriating it as a communication channel, an extension, even a part of themselves. Born into a Cantonese-speaking family in Singapore, I had traversed this journey myself from primary school to university. I was also inspired by the story of the Polish sailor, Joseph Conrad, who started to learn English around the age of nineteen but who became one of the greatest novelists writing in English. I have on occasion told Conrad's story to my students to encourage them to persevere despite flagging motivation.

To provide the conditions that make it possible for Chinese learners to develop a more integrative motivation, the following are some suggestions. First, we can work with the instrumental motivation and the belief in effort for achievement that most PRC students already possess. This twin driving force can be tapped by initiating discussion on setting goals for learning and planning learning activities. These learning goals and activities/strategies should gradually lead away from those related to vocabulary and grammar towards those that encourage authentic communication as students develop in their learner beliefs. Second, we can provide a positive L2 learning experience, as much as possible, including support through expert–novice as well as novice–novice scaffolding. It is hoped that learning in such a supportive environment can create the zone of proximal development for these learners (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90). Ideally, the materials and methodology should also be well designed to stimulate and enhance learning. Third, we need to facilitate an ongoing conversation with and among students about their learning goals, their ideal L2 self, their agency and investment towards their identities, their imagined communities, and even global citizenship through EIL. They need to be made aware of their unfolding learning selves in continuity and fluidity as they journey onward. Together, the above suggestions could provide a broader vista to encourage the PRC students to persevere in their English learning journey especially when their motivation takes a dip at one point or another.

We teachers, however, cannot achieve this paradigm shift alone. We need the support of the local university community to integrate our students with the larger world outside the classroom. The proverb has it that it takes a village to raise a child. Likewise, whether this is done through activities on campus, off campus or through computer-mediated contexts, it takes a community to provide the support for these learners to become motivated and autonomous self-starters. Learning with others and then by themselves will ensure a greater empowerment. Both communicative language teaching and sociocultural theory are useful frameworks for understanding the need for the involvement of community.

For a start, senior members of the Senior Middle 3 (SM3) or Senior Middle 2 (SM2) BC imagined community (Teng, 2008) can be called upon to provide support to their juniors of the incoming cohorts. Through her study of the trajectory of Ming, a former SM3 student, Teng found that many former BC students belong to this vibrant community. The seven focal participants of this study readily gave their advice to their imaginary juniors in response to Question 5 of the email interview, "What would the most useful advice be to a newly matriculated PRC student

on the same programme?” The BC administration can organise formal or semi-formal dialogues between the past and current cohorts of students. The successful completion of the BC and even UDP of those who have gone before them would most likely inspire and motivate the current students to set clear goals for themselves and work towards achieving them. It would be highly possible too for teachers of successive batches of BC students to invite their former students to interact with their juniors informally. This is a strategy that I have used; I have invited different batches of students to informal get-togethers during Chinese New Year or other occasions. In fact, I was pleasantly surprised by an extra-linguistic success: two students, Guang and Jing (pseudonyms) from different cohorts met at one of these events and got married later. Becoming linguistically adept at learning French too, the couple had gone on to study in France and completed their MBAs at the HEC, Paris. Theirs is an example of Chinese learners who have transitioned well in their life and language learning journeys.

The local and international students in the new globalised university contexts can provide another source of community support for the PRC students especially during the BC. In the case of NUS, the PRC learners attend dedicated classes for the BC and are provided accommodation in the same hall of residence; thus, they have little opportunity to befriend the larger NUS student community. How then can they get the opportunity to practise their listening and speaking with the local and other international students? Again, teachers can play a key role in arranging for face-to-face get-togethers and online interaction between BC and their regular course students. For the latter approach, Blake and Zyzik (2003, cited in Thorne & Black, 2007) connected Spanish heritage language students with Spanish foreign language learners in a university through synchronous chat. Both groups reported benefits. Thorne (2004) used an email-mediated peer-revision activity to connect lower-intermediate students and more advanced Spanish foreign language students. Some of the lower-intermediate students reported that they were motivated by interacting with “proximally more advanced near-peers” (2004, cited in Thorne & Black, 2007, p. 138). Such strategies have the potential to motivate BC students to advance in their learning journey as well as provide opportunity to use English to communicate with a possible target community.

### **7.2.3 What/how to teach and how/where to get help**

#### *Pedagogy, resources and strategies*

The curriculum and community are crucial to the Chinese learners’ transitions but the teachers’ pedagogy and decisions are equally important. They do “linguistic and cultural bridge building” (Teo, 2008, cited in Lam, 2011, p. 413) to help students make the connection between the classroom and the real world. Also, our lessons should be designed and executed to best facilitate learning for the PRC learners according to their learner characteristics. For example, knowing that they are unaccustomed to speaking up in class, teachers may need to provide suitable stimulus

to elicit the desired response and engagement in the ESL/EIL context. Observing Yin's lesson where pair work was used, Lam noted the enthusiastic and lively discussion as students presented their responses to a ranking activity designed to enhance students' understanding. However, twenty minutes of teacher monologue actually preceded this lively discussion. Thus, the silence of the students during teacher talk may not necessarily indicate that the students are passive. Thinking could be taking place at a deeper level (Biggs, 1996) which can be elicited by appropriate stimuli and tasks. We also need to keep in mind Krashen's filter hypothesis: "You need comprehensible input, a low filter, a low-anxiety situation where people can focus on the message and not on the form" (Krashen, 2002, p. 222).

Moreover, the Chinese students need to be initiated into the Anglo-Saxon or Western culture of learning. In particular, coming from a background in Chinese academic writing, they need to learn the rhetoric and conventions for Western academic writing. According to Liu (2011, December), "contemporary Chinese writing and even native-Chinese speakers' English writing" are influenced by two strictly formulated rhetorical traditions, the *Ba Gu Wen* (eight-legged) essay and *Qi-Cheng-Zhuan-He* (beginning-elaboration-transition-conclusion). Both these traditional organisational patterns have been recognised as contributing to inductiveness (or indirectness) in Chinese EFL/ESL students' writing (p. 2/6 (W)). In addition, the PRC students need to develop a greater sense of audience awareness when they write as, in their former exam-oriented EFL context, they wrote chiefly to satisfy course and exam requirements, their teachers and external examiners (Liu, 2011). Oral skills for discussion and presentation in an academic setting should also be learnt and practised by the students to prepare for the requirements of their core courses. If necessary, the learners' listening and reading skills can be strengthened through in-class and/or self-access exposure and practice. At the same time that their communicative competence is being built up, students can be guided to appropriately apply grammatical structures and vocabulary learnt.

In addition to communicative competence, the PRC students need to develop intercultural competence. This is a necessary learning outcome given the multicultural setting that characterises most major universities in the Western countries and increasingly in Asia. However, besides information, the students also need *practice* in intercultural competence; this is not easy to achieve and may mean extra-curricular effort on the part of teachers. To facilitate the development of their students' intercultural competence, the staff teaching on the BC in NUS have used various approaches. Some of us host our students to a meal in our home, especially during the festive seasons of Christmas and the Chinese New Year, while others have taken small groups on visits to places of interest. A more formalised approach is described in Devlin and Peacock (2009) of (the University of) Sunderland's Language and News Group (SLANG). The weekly two-hour forum was initially facilitated by a staff member and conducted during the weekend. The informal meetings, open to staff, international students, their friends and families, begin with the discussion of some news stories. This often leads to interesting and unexpected exchanges on various cultures' attitudes, beliefs and practices, helped along by refreshments reflecting

particular cuisines or festivals. The international students' feedback highlighted the results that SLANG helped them make "quick and effective adjustments to their new lifestyle" (p. 178) and studies. Its success was evident when a PhD student took over the facilitation and others chipped in to organise outings. This approach does seem promising if teachers are prepared to expend the "extra" time and effort.

Furthermore, the students may also be exposed to and given training in learning and practising strategies that go beyond memorisation, reciting and reviewing. For example, one participant in this study, Chu, tended towards multimodality, using print, online, electronic, audio and/or visual materials. The learners just need to expand their repertoire and depth of strategies; they need not discard tried methods but refine them. For example, Shen not only memorised vocabulary but practised using the words in writing and speaking, while Sun made vocabulary and content learning symbiotic by learning content and language together.

Going beyond vocabulary learning to discourse and writing development, I would recommend that teachers encourage their students to keep a learner diary/log/blog and write regularly, say once a week or fortnight. The students may or may not submit their diaries to the teachers, but they can be made aware of the many benefits for their learning journey. These benefits include self-analysis of difficulties and achievements, attitudes towards language, use of strategies as well as growth in metacognitive awareness over time. If teachers do get to read their students' learner diaries, the information and feedback can lead teachers to plan more effective classes and to better understand their students. In my research using the diary as an instrument, the findings indicate that it helped the participants to be more reflective and critical towards their own learning and their learning contexts. It also allowed me a window into their concerns and progress. Thus, the diary has proven to be a very useful instrument for learning, teaching, besides being a rich source of data for research. This finding resonates with Norton's (2000) experience of the diary study as a pedagogical practice: it can contribute towards integrating "formal and natural sides of language learning" (p. 134).

In terms of resources, to address the chief concerns of these students as indicated in the findings, vocabulary and speaking, until they grasp the bigger picture of communication, teachers may recommend materials that the learners could use independently. This present generation of PRC students are no doubt digital natives. It is highly probable that much of their social and/or academic communication is mediated by participation in digital environments. Thus, teachers can recommend corpuses and websites to provide learners a head start in independent vocabulary learning. As for speaking, the spoken component of the American National Corpus may be a useful tool (McCarthy & O'Keeffe, 2004). It may be necessary, however, for teachers to bear in mind that, while we encourage independent learning, guidance and monitoring are still needed to ensure that students learn in context. For example, we need to stress to the learners the importance of proper social and cultural contextualisation of speaking activities (Hughes, 2002, as cited in McCarthy & O'Keeffe, 2004). Learning from the resources in isolation may not prove helpful to these learners.



We need also to support young learners with the necessary human resources to aid them in their transitions within the institution. For example, in NUS, faculty, department and teachers provide the necessary guidance and assistance to all their students. The former SM2/3 students (that is the SM2/3 imagined community), and the NUS student community can also be tapped and can prove a tremendous resource as peer mentors. Together the above groups can provide academic, linguistic and social support. At a higher level, the communication channels with university officials who are overseeing the learners' academic and other matters should also be kept open. Just as they were socialised into the TCCL, the PRC learners need help to be socialised into their new learning context. The students themselves, however, should also be active and even proactive to seize or create opportunities for themselves to practise the language skills most important to them. Drawing on a similar context for postgraduate PRC students in American universities, we can reflect on Huang's (2012) observation that, in addition to culture shock, new entrants also often experience *learning* shock when faced with unfamiliar learning and teaching methods. The researcher thus recommends that support mechanisms be built into a mentoring culture (involving both faculty and peers) to open up channels of communication so that new students can learn to address their struggles.

### 7.3 Designing and handling tasks: an example

In this section, I describe a sample task, one which I carried out in past SM3 classes, and how the task will be redesigned and handled differently in future. The research process has made me realise the challenges Chinese students face. Thus, I intend to build in more teacher–student and student–student support. If necessary, I may allow the use of some Chinese in small group discussions in the initial phase of the BC or EAP class.

Speaking appears to be the most formidable skill for many of the participants. They had to deal with content, delivery and the psychological barrier due to the fear of losing face, especially about the oral report (OR), which often surfaced in the data. Yet, it was also reported as a very useful activity that helped the participants to build their courage and confidence. Therefore, more attention should be given to this aspect of the course through guidance, training, time and exposure. My findings are also parallel with those made by Lam in her interview with students (2011): “The majority of the interviewees liked the duty report they were assigned . . . [which] helped build their confidence in speaking English, they could have ‘many different topics’ and they could share something [they] like” (p. 200).

Given below is the outline of how I would train students for the OR in my next BC. In my past BC classes, students delivered an oral report individually on any topic using recently learnt vocabulary. Thus, it was designed to give students practice in using vocabulary as well as speaking publicly. Beyond these original goals and with insights from the findings of the current study, I aim to extend the task to foster greater integration of skills, collaborative learning and development of confidence and competence. In the outline, I endeavour to show how students, working



in small groups under the guidance of the teacher, can support one another in planning and delivering their OR. In the process, they extend their skills in reading, listening, speaking and writing, while incorporating the vocabulary and grammar they have learnt/acquired in the BC. The desired learning outcome is greater confidence and competence in learning English, which would move them further along their learning journey. It is possible too that this collaborative and guided approach would eventually lead to greater learner autonomy. Judging from my teaching experience with recent EAP students who had been SM2 BC students before they matriculated as NUS freshmen, I envisage that the approach outline below would work well with future BC students. These recent EAP learners and former SM2 BC learners exhibited similar characteristics as the focal participants of this study.

### Outline for OR training

- 1 In the past, most BC teachers including myself would expect students to prepare for and deliver their weekly OR independently. In my case, I listened, invited peer comment and gave suggestions for improvement, which constituted post-activity training. Teachers usually have very busy schedules, but making students individually responsible for their OR can be counterproductive.
- 2 In the course of analysing the data, I came to understand how much pressure, uncertainty, and loneliness, initially at least, that students experienced while preparing for the OR. Yet there was usefulness and triumph for those who tried and progressed.
- 3 Thus, in the first month of the BC, more teacher guidance and peer support can be given to provide expert–novice and novice–novice scaffolding.
- 4 The aim of the OR will be made known to the students: to help them integrate different skills and to provide training in collaborative learning.
- 5 Each day, about four students give their OR so that all twenty students in a group give an OR over the five-day study week.
- 6 One week to a few days before their ORs, I will initiate the training by sitting with the four students and chatting with them about the words they have recently learnt and how/where these are learnt. We will go on to discuss possible topics for their OR in a casual, supportive atmosphere. Chinese is allowed when they are “stuck” with choosing the right words to explain their decisions. Then they write their short pieces in 150–200 words. Students read out their own pieces to the rest in the small group and elicit comments. Open yet friendly peer feedback is encouraged. I will give constructive comments, and praise, wherever possible.
- 7 Students may see me one-to-one at first before their OR (Chinese students prefer this consultative approach to asking questions openly in a group), but I need to wean them off this practice by the end of the first or, at the latest, second month.
- 8 I also teach the whole class speech delivery skills in the Western academic convention, such as eye contact and gestures, and model them prior to the first

- OR. I may get a good speaker to be peer model or show a video recording of a former student's OR.
- 9 Students are to rehearse OR with a partner and to give each other feedback for improvement. Thus, I integrate skills for the task and scaffold the collaborative learning and practice.
  - 10 I would endeavor to facilitate the OR sessions in a supportive and relaxed manner. A small-group discussion on what went well and what could be done better follows the OR to help students build on their performance and experience.
  - 11 To encourage my students to keep on making improvements, I will ask them to give themselves time to develop their competence and confidence.
  - 12 I may share the following view of mastery:

You are proficient in a language to the extent that you possess it, make it your own, bend it to your will, assert yourself through it rather than simply submit to the dictates of its form. . . . Real proficiency is when you are able to take possession of the language, turn it to your advantage, and make it real for you. This is what mastery means.

(Widdowson, 1994, p. 384)

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# EPILOGUE

## Limitations, future directions, EIL/ELF and focal participants

### Limitations

This study examined the learner characteristics and transitions of seven focal participants in a multiple-case study approach. One limitation of this small number and the case study approach is difficulty with regard to generalisation. However, I have also argued that this limitation can be addressed or moderated with careful consideration during the processes of sampling, analysis and interpretation. The insights we gain from the depth of description and the attention to contextualisation can inform us richly of the phenomenon we seek to explore. In addition, as for the present study, we have also been given a longitudinal view of the transitions in the learner characteristics of the seven participants and the growth in their competence and confidence over nearly half a decade.

Second, in terms of context, this study reports the findings from one university in one country; thus, the context also makes this project a case study in itself, albeit a multiple-case one. This may seem to constitute another limitation to its findings; however, this fact does not necessarily restrict the usefulness of the insights to other learning contexts. As we have discussed in the literature review, Chinese learners in other study-abroad contexts appear to experience the same challenges and transitions as the participants of this study. Instead, we may view the Chinese students' study-abroad experience at the National University of Singapore (NUS) as a microcosm of similar experiences in universities in Asia and the West. In terms of NUS's large student population and faculty composition, there is a vibrant mix of local and international students and teachers. Internationalisation also comes in the forms of tie-ups with other universities through student exchange and twinning programmes, and other alliances. The university is a comprehensive one offering a myriad of degree programmes and modules. In fact, for three consecutive years, NUS has emerged as Asia's top university as ranked by the *Times Higher Education* magazine (Davie, 2018).

To go on would sound like boasting; therefore, I shall desist, but the context of our study should not be a serious limitation to colleagues who are similarly engaged in the teaching of English to Chinese students in other English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as an International Language (EIL) contexts.

Third, I chose the path of opportunistic sampling in Stage 2 of data collection when only seven out of the original thirty-eight diarists responded. The sample may thus be considered a skewed one as those who responded to the email interview in their final year were probably motivated students in the first place and thus likely to succeed in their Undergraduate Degree Programme (UDP). Indeed, the participants were arguably capable students who learnt English well enough to complete their UDP and went on to further studies or gainful employment. What about the unsuccessful students who fell by the wayside? Those who did not graduate or who barely scraped through? However, I would argue that there was a good distribution of personality type, family background, regional origin, English proficiency level, overall performance and subject major among the seven participants. Even among the high achievers, Chu, Shen and Wei, who went to PhD programmes, the differences in their learner characteristics and transitions were apparent. Thus, the sampling did not seem to have skewed the results.

Finally, it may be thought that the study could be a little dated as the data were collected between 2006 and 2010. Since it is common knowledge that China is continually changing, surely, the current cohorts of young students leaving for universities abroad must be somewhat different from the participants of this study? We can imagine the former to be more sophisticated, more tech-savvy, more proficient in English and more confident than their “seniors”? Perhaps so but then again perhaps not. The traditional Chinese culture of learning (TCCL) is still prevalent in the Chinese ELT context; the fundamentals have remained the same (Shen, 2016). In a recent semester, to capture a profile of the current students from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), I invited the former Senior Middle 2 (SM2) students and current NUS freshmen in my English for Academic Purposes (EAP) class to write a short paragraph. The broad topic was either the highlights of their English learning journey or their view on the importance of English for their academic and professional careers. It was entirely voluntary and only five responded. The results of the content analysis were interesting as they were reminiscent of those in my study; these younger students did not seem very different from their “seniors” who participated in my project. One of them, Xu (pseudonym), covered most of the themes of this current study, and for that reason, I reproduce his paragraph below for the reader’s reference:

I started learning English at primary one. It was a new thing to me. At that age, I’m so curious about new things and that was the first and the most important point in my journey. Different vocabulary, different pronunciation, different grammar and different way of writing, all these differences attracted me to go further and deeper. That was where my journey started. However, after the passion of finding differences gone, what left was just the routine of learning a new language, memorizing and practicing. I don’t want to say

but learning English started boring me when I was about 10 or 11. At that time, I just considered learning English as a task and I needed to repeat “No pain, no gain” time and time again to force me carry on because I know the importance of English as an international language. I didn’t enjoy myself learning English those days but somehow I didn’t give up. I believe if I kept carrying on, good things would happen in time. It did happen when I was 15. I went to an English camp at summer holiday and got to know a teacher with great passion and his teaching style inspired me. He made me realize learning English is joyful. At that time, I made up my mind to study overseas. I fall in love with this language and I feel motivated to improve my English.

Having discussed the contributions of my study despite the limitations, I will proceed in the next section to suggest possible future directions that could emerge from my research, new pathways that can be forged for future studies on Chinese learners or other international students.

### **Future directions**

First, my longitudinal, qualitative study, using a multiple-case study and multiple-instrument approach to gather data, has served to highlight that methodology makes a difference to the findings. One contribution of this study is its in-depth examination of Chinese students’ learner characteristics and transitions based on data supplied by the focal participants themselves; they were given the opportunity to voice their experiences, thoughts, feelings, actions, sense of identity, hopes and plans, in relation to English learning. This is in contrast to previous studies on PRC students as cited in the literature review, where findings were based mainly on observations by teachers, or quantitative surveys carried out on a whole cohort. Thus, I recommend for future research on PRC or other groups of international students the use of similar in-depth, triangulated, qualitative approaches where participants are given a chance to share their learning journeys. This has the potential for yielding rich data that will enable us to learn more about the characteristics and transition experiences of our students. This in turn will allow us to better support them in their English learning journeys.

Second, for a greater potential for generalisability, this study can be replicated with a larger number of PRC participants. As for sampling, where the luxury of choice is available, researchers can try to ensure an equitable distribution of participants from different regions, institutions and sociocultural backgrounds for the best possible outcomes. However, for multiple-case studies, the amount of data gathered using multiple instruments over several years is likely to be formidable. It would be necessary for researchers to carefully plan the management and analysis of the data.

Third, to study the impact of different ESL or EIL contexts, a comparison of study-abroad contexts can be explored. Researchers have ample choice among universities in the West where increasing numbers of Chinese students have enrolled

themselves. Opportunities are also present in similar settings in Asia and elsewhere among English-medium universities. The comparison and contrast of the results and implications from different contexts is an exciting possibility.

Fourth, due to its use of opportunistic sampling, this study has focused on arguably successful learners who made significant progress in their learning journeys. It would be instructive to conduct a similar qualitative and triangulated study on less successful students who may have difficulties in making progress. The findings from such a study would provide valuable information for supporting this group in making the necessary transitions in their learning journeys.

Having considered general directions for future research on PRC or other groups of international students, we now focus on more specific areas that could be studied. With China's development and push for reforms in its ELT, there is speculation that the TCCL's influence may be gradually eroded. Whether this is indeed the case has to be borne out by careful research. An investigation of the influence of the TCCL on recent cohorts of senior high school students or undergraduates seems a worthwhile project. The findings can inform the curriculum and pedagogy of higher education in both China and study-abroad contexts

In addition to the TCCL's influence, we may examine the specific learner characteristics of Chinese learners. For example, is their motivation to learn English still largely instrumental? Do they still believe strongly that effort is the supreme factor for success in learning English? What strategies do they employ for learning vocabulary? Does affect still feature prominently in their learning journeys? What identities and imagined communities do they aspire to? Along with these characteristics, what sorts of transitions do they experience through time and space, especially in a longitudinal study?

The mention of transitions leads me to my reflections on my own transformation as a result of this project. I had sought to learn more about my PRC students; in the process of studying them, I learnt that I started with TCCL learner characteristics myself and transitioned from being a Second Language learner to becoming a First Language learner in my own English learning journey. I had wanted to help my Chinese students grow as English learners but learnt to grow as a person from their generosity, determination and vision. I had expected at the outset to finish this project in five years; instead, I took nearly ten but I learnt so much more besides the project itself: humility, tenacity, patience. But that is what the researchers before me had forewarned: your research can change you. I ardently hope the reader has enjoyed this journey as much as I have and this book project will be a help to colleagues and students in their life and learning journeys.

## EIL/ELF

Tertiary institutions in Europe and Asia are increasingly offering English-medium courses to draw more international students to their programmes. This is happening because "the geographical and domain expansion of English has been driven by globalization" (Hu, 2018, p. 79). Even among "Chinese" university students in one

country, for example, the United Kingdom, they are a “superdiverse” group, arriving from different parts of the world and speaking distinctive varieties of Chinese (Li & Zhu, 2013, pp. 516, 517). Two examples are Bradley whose family arrived in the United Kingdom from China when he was four years old and who received all his education in England and Stephen, who left China for New Zealand with his family when he was five years old. They moved to Singapore when Stephen was eleven, and then to the United Kingdom when Stephen was sixteen (Li & Zhu, 2013, p. 521). No doubt, these students probably speak different varieties of English too.

Given the diversity of current ESL and EIL contexts that our students, including Chinese learners, will face during their academic and even professional careers, I again ask the question of “What must I know to support my students in their learning journeys?” I believe this question is also relevant to my colleagues in ELT. Thus, I look to literature as I did for my earlier research; besides literature related to EIL (see definition in Prologue), I also survey World Englishes (WE) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). In the following paragraphs, I present a summary of the insights I have gained so far.

WE has been well-known and well-established since Kachru’s introduction of the Three Concentric Circles: Inner, Outer and Expanding (1985). It “is a research field that generates new knowledge and insights about the diversity of the English language and its impact on various aspects of language practices, including English language teaching” (Matsuda & Matsuda, 2018, p. 65). A more recent paradigm is ELF which Jenkins defines as “English used as contact language among speakers from different languages” (2009, cited in Jenkins, 2018, p. 12). Generally, it refers to the same phenomenon as EIL (Jenkins, 2018, p. 13).

Related to the above concepts is that of “dynamic ecological approach” advocated by Murray (2018, p. 47) given the global growth in multilingual communities and cross-cultural communication where ELF/EIL plays an important role. To be an “ecological aware” teacher, one needs to be ready to adapt one’s methodology to “recognize, respect and value the belief systems of others” especially as these relate to “students’ expectations and behaviours” (p. 52). Therefore, we need to be aware of our students’ different cultures of learning. ELT should be refocused as “*essentially* an ecological and relational activity” so that learners develop as “mediators able to negotiate culturally and linguistically diverse interactions” (p. 55). Moreover, teachers need to make intercultural competence a part of their practice and assessments need to be authentic to reflect effective and appropriate communication in a culturally and linguistically diverse environment.

Viewing the heterogenous linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds of today’s English speakers from another angle, Matsuda and Matsuda (2018) propose Teaching English as an International Language (TEIL) as the way forward in ELT. To realise the TEIL paradigm’s goal of preparing students as competent users of EIL while using their evolving varieties of English (p. 66), the following considerations are involved. Students need to be exposed to different varieties of English that are considered legitimate whenever possible so that they do not think that the target variety is



the sole, acceptable one. They also need to acquire a variety of communicative strategies and leverage opportunities to practise them. Materials for learning and practice can come from a diversity of contexts including the global community, the culture of learners' future interlocutors, and the learners' own culture (p. 68). Matsuda and Matsuda (2018) also emphasise that "*how* we present the language is as critical as *what* we present." Thus, teachers should "focus on fostering students' awareness, sensitivity and respect that are necessary for cross-cultural communication" (p. 69).

Having implemented, reviewed and re-envisioned a TEIL course in an Australian university context, Marlina (2018) recommends the following set of principles for EIL curricula, that teachers

- inspire students to understand the nature of English language variation and keep learning;
- engage students in developing metacultural competence;
- address sociopolitical issues or questions; and
- recognise struggles and tensions as normal, natural and necessary.

(p. 238)

I hope the brief survey of literature above has given readers food for thought, as it has for me, on supporting our students, including Chinese learners, in their navigation through increasingly diverse academic and social landscapes. We may have to adapt the insights and recommendations to our particular ELT situations but we certainly need to equip students with the resources and provide them with the practice to become competent and confident users of EIL/ELF and not just ESL. For that is what they will need in the varied linguistic and cultural contexts in HE today and their workplace tomorrow in a globalised world.

### **Focal participants: present snapshots**

As I worked on this book project, I wondered how the seven focal participants were doing. I had kept in contact with them from time to time after the end of data collection, mainly through gatherings with their BC group. The last gathering for the group was in December 2014 at my home; two of the participants, Chu and Sun, were among those who turned up. Since then, we had all been busy and not kept in touch. Last year, however, Qi visited me at my office to share the good news of his new fatherhood and citizenship.

When I decided to include snapshots of the focal participants' present lives in this Epilogue, I contacted them through email, social media and another student in their BC group. They were invited to write a short reflection on their continuing journey in learning/using English after their UDP in NUS. The following questions were provided should they need some prompting in their reflection:

- 1 How has your knowledge/use of English impacted your life in Singapore and other places?

- 2 How has English helped/affected you in your work/relationships/outlook on life, etc.?
- 3 Who do you use English with? Family, friends, colleagues, business associates (here and abroad), etc.?
- 4 What are your thoughts and feelings towards English now?

It was gratifying to receive warm replies from two of the focal participants and to know that they are doing well in their life and ongoing English journeys. I could see from their email replies that they lead busy lives and all the more I appreciate their efforts to respond to my invitation. I reproduce below their reflections verbatim for readers who are interested to “keep up” with these former participants.

From Sun

Hi, Ms Fong, hope you are all good! I received your message from Lin and am glad to contribute a bit on that. My reflection as below:

In the past 8 years after I graduated, I more and more think that English is very important for us. I realized its importance more during my life post-graduation, i.e. during my work life and personal relationship as well comparing with the days at college. Maybe it's because during college, English is more used in academic study, so I learned more terminologies in the area of my study. I think that English speaking and listening is more important to me later on as I have to communicate with various non-Chinese colleagues and friends. The vocabularies that are needed are broader across different aspects of day-to-day life. I actually became more and more interested in English language as there are more practical needs for me to learn it nowadays. I have no doubt that better English will surely help in my career development in a way or another.

I also wish I could have started to learn English at an earlier age instead of only started post primary school around age of 14 . . . I hope in the future my own kids can start to learn English as early as when they are still babies. In fact, I recommended my sister in China to take English as her primary major for college as I wish she can reach out to the outer world easily and grasp this essential and useful skill at an early stage of her life.

Hope the above helps, feel free to correct my original wording for adaption to your book.

You may connect to me by xxxx xxxx [mobile number], take care ya!

Warm Regards  
Sun

From Qi

Hi Ms Fong,

Thank you and everything is going well. I am working on two start-up business, and also helping [my wife] with her newly took over Tuition Centre, which make

me quite occupied. But I am always happy to help you, and I feel sorry that I didn't send you the paragraph I promised earlier. Here are my short answers, hope they can help/be useful.

- 1&2 Being able to use (speak, write, read) English has helped me to get my degree in Singapore and also gave me more job opportunities. I have made friends from Spain, England, Norway, Scotland, Bahrain, Canada, and almost all the SEA countries, which would be impossible without knowing English.
- 3 I use English mainly with colleagues, clients and business associates here in Singapore and many abroad. Being able to use English gives more exposure and opportunities for my business.
- 4 English is the world's language. It's the language of business, finance, travel and many more. Learning English is a great step to know the world better.

I am happy to do a call with you if you need more input.

Best wishes,  
Qi  
xxxx xxxx [mobile number]

I will not attempt to analyse these snapshots except to reiterate the importance of EIL/ELF as reflected in the lives and concerns that Sun and Qi shared in their answers. I hope that their responses on communicating in English with people from a diversity of nationalities have also underscored the importance of intercultural communication. To develop that facility, learners need to become more aware of how crucial it is for them to develop their communicative competence in a culturally and linguistically diverse world. With this last thought, I take my leave of the reader. Fare ye well!

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# APPENDICES



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# APPENDIX A

## Former PRC SM students: some snapshots

### 1. Guang (SM3 1997)

#### *From monologue to communication*

Despite my confidence with my English proficiency when I arrived at Singapore, the English language remained an instrument of literature. I could appreciate it, write in it, and even perform on stage, but it was not a way of communication. Everything that I said was prepared. I did not ask any Question that I did not know the answer. And I was expecting the same from the others. I was comfortable with what I was capable of, until something “out of routine” a few months later changed my attitude.

Upon our arrival, the Ministry of Education helped arrange POSBank to open saving accounts for all the Chinese students. (Note: It was long before the acquisition of POSBank by DBS.) It was convenient, and served all the purposes, until the second quarter of 1997, when I needed to deposit a foreign cheque. I went to the POSBank branch in Yusof Ishak House and approached the counter. I thought that it was a really easy task – the only uncertainties were the exchange rate and the delay before the fund would be available in my account balance. But to my greatest surprise, I was told that it could not be done. In spite of what its name might imply, POSBank was “Post Office Savings”, and a non-banking financial institution. This sounds silly now, but I was frozen at that moment. I was facing a situation that was completely out my knowledge and I was not prepared. I suddenly became speechless and quietly left the bank, confused.

When I calmed down, and thought it over, the solution was rather simple. I opened another account with DBS and deposited the cheque. But it was the few minutes in POSBank that shocked me, and made me think again about what I had to do with this “language”.



### ***Tolerance of accents***

For historical and political reasons, when I grew up, American English was the de facto standard spoken language. Outside the classrooms in Singapore, I had to face a new way of speaking – the Queen’s English with a Singaporean flavour. It took me quite some time to adapt to the environment. But this experience helped me greatly later on, when I began to have contacts with people from different parts of the world, with very different accents and varied levels of proficiency.

### ***Speaking proper English***

Following Prime Minister Goh’s speech in 1999 and the launch of the Speak Good English Movement, I realised the potential issue of speaking in an ungrammatical way, especially in my future career development. From then on, although as an identity of a proud member of the Singaporean society, I kept my Singaporean accent, including the rhythm and stresses, I tried always to speak in a grammatically correct way, and as far as possible, to speak in full sentences. This has been proven an effective way to demonstrate good education and professionalism in my later career.

### ***The working language of an international group***

After my MBA, I joined one of the world’s largest petrol and gas engineering firms. Despite its French origin, it has established a global organisation with more than 200 subsidiaries in 48 countries. It is only natural that English has been chosen as the group’s official working language.

My job has given me the opportunities to travel across borders and communicate with colleagues from different parts of the world. English language is essential to make my job even possible.

In the future, I’ll continue to improve my French and Spanish, and might even pick up another language like Portuguese if necessary. Nevertheless, English will remain a key to any of my future roles and responsibilities in the working environment.

## **2. Jing (SM3 1998)**

### ***Learning English during 6-month intensive course***

I knew little English before I went to Singapore. I answered less than half of the Questions in the entry exam of English intensive course.

When I looked back, I really learnt tremendously during the 6-month intensive course. I tried memorising words in the dictionary, which is not an effective way. I read fairy tales, but could not appreciate the stories due to unrecognised words. I listened to BBC at least 3 times a week, each time more than 30 minutes. Many months later, I started to understand news headlines. I was even longing to dream in English, but it only happened long after.

### ***Adapt to the Singaporean accent and learn technical writing skills in NUS***

After six-month intensive course, it was still difficult to understand classmates and some professors in the first semester of undergraduate study, as some of them carry strong Singaporean accent. I picked up Singaporean accent shortly after I made friends with local students.

I was elected Secretary in IEEE (Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers) NUS Student Branch (What a joke!), and was responsible for all external written communications. I studied all the formal letters in the past years to IEEE Singapore and various companies, and spent 4 hours preparing my first letter, with 3 sentences. After one year, writing formal letters became a piece of cake.

I took the course of “technical communication” for 2 semesters in NUS. During the course, I learnt how to formulate technical report, memorandum, meeting minutes and how to prepare oral presentation. It was really useful in writing laboratory reports and in my professional life as an engineer.

### ***Reading regularly in English through reading Bible and the daily bread***

I started regularly attending church in 1999. Since then, I have been reading in English spontaneously through reading bible and the daily bread. Whenever I had difficulties in study or personal life, I read Psalms and Proverbs, and sometimes Revelation.

Through weekly bible study group, I ought to think and discuss many subjects and matters in English.

### ***Use English as a daily language through living in Sweden***

After using English for 6 years, I was able to work in English. When I arrived in Sweden, I knew very few English words for food, clothes or words dealing with daily life. It had been possible to buy food and clothes by speaking Mandarin in Singapore.

My landlord was a Swedish girl, and the common language was English. After one year living together, we both improved in English. During this year, I learned to speak proper English, with little Singaporean accent and without mixing Chinese words and English words in the same sentence.

### ***Build up vocabularies from preparing GRE test***

In October 2005, I spent 1 month preparing GRE test. I did not obtain a good score on GRE, but learnt many vocabularies which are not used in my daily and professional life, e.g. sapphire, armistice and sanctimonious. Later I found that it became easier to read newspaper and even professional journals, and reading became a real pleasure.

### ***Revise and learn grammar from preparing GMAT test***

In 2010/2011, I spent half a year preparing GMAT test. During this period, I revised and learnt some important grammar rules. For example, how to use the appositive? How to differentiate “it” and “this” as pronoun? In this process, I learnt to write more concisely and precisely in English.

### ***Some facts***

I could understand English films 6 years after I went to Singapore.

I could not understand some English songs even today.

Reading in English became a pleasure in 2006.

The more French I learn, the more I find English is easy to learn.

### ***Role of English in professional life***

The ability of communicating in English (and Chinese) is a key advantage to find a job in France. English is truly an international language in big companies and international organisations.

## **3. Yu (SM3 1999)**

Dear Ms Fong,

Thanks for your email. Below is my writing about my English learning experience. Maybe it is not well organized. Let me know if I missed something useful to you.

I came to Singapore in November 1998. I was sent to an English course in NUS before I started my engineering course in NTU. The English course includes reading, writing, listening and grammar, which is similar to what I was taught in China. However, the only and most important difference is that the course is conducted in English in NUS but in Mandarin in China. That is more helpful to improve my listening and speaking in English. Although I could read and write English before I came to Singapore, I had to admit I faced plenty of difficulties in listening and speaking English. Now I still remember that I could not understand anything, even the homework, in the first English class conducted by an Indian teacher. In the daytime, I learned English in the class. In the evening, I reviewed all the new vocabularies learned and tried to read local English newspaper. Besides, I would also go to Internet chat room to chat with people there in English so that I could apply what I have learned.

In China I studied English just for passing the examination because there was no occasion for me to apply it. But in Singapore I studied it for surviving, to be more precisely, for better surviving. I have to understand English because all the subjects in the university are taught in English, and all the homework and exam papers are also written in English. It is very difficult for one to find a good job after

graduation if one cannot speak English and express oneself well in English. English is so common in daily life in Singapore that one has to master English in order to lead a better life here.

English is becoming a basic and important tool for me nowadays. It is used in my daily job, e.g. writing emails to colleagues and customers, communicating with people who can only speak and write English. Mastering English is a must because all the documents in the company are written in English.

Best regards,  
YP

#### 4. Jun (SM2 2002)

Dear Ms Fong

Sorry for the late reply, I was just discharged from hospital yesterday after giving birth. Below is the essay. Hope it not too late.

Thanks and best regards  
SJ

When first came to Singapore, I still followed pretty much the learning method of English formed under the English education environment in China, which focuses on vocabulary and grammar. After started the bridging course, a lot of effort was made on speaking, reading and writing. It was not easy to change one's learning habit. However, with the help from each teacher, the switch was made successfully.

When I recalled nowadays, it was in the English bridging course that my English improved the most and the fastest. By exercising spoken English, the flow of the language was more fluent and the accent was corrected. Wide reading is a fast way to master a language. Personally I gained a lot of language knowledge and new vocabulary by a lot of reading and writing exercise.

English has been a very important part of my study and work. Without mastering the universal language, I was not able to go to overseas for exchange study; I was not able to have free-and-easy trips to different countries; I was not able to have job trainings in USA. I am very grateful to have the English bridging course, which helped me to build up a solid foundation and good starting point.

#### 5. Zai (SM2 2002)

I started learning English only since I was around 14 years old when I was in secondary school. At that time, our learning was more focused on listening and written English. After I joined the NUS bridging course, I certainly gained much more exposure to spoken English while English learning, the whole process to me had been very different from before. One clear difference was we were taught to

implement what we have learnt by speaking up rather than merely memorizing the vocabulary. I strongly felt that I could master the word much better when I was using it. Besides, we started from learning quite simple yet interesting materials which really helped to build my passion and confidence about English. Importantly the teachers (I remember Ms F, Mr S, Ms L and another thin tall lady whose name I cannot recall at the moment) were all very patient and encouraging. They could always think of different ways to motivate us keep expressing ourselves in English. In such environment, though I was still struggling with the language at that time, I was much keener to communicate in English. My passion about English stayed on throughout university. The more I practiced, the better I could speak. I actively participated in various university events to talk to people from everywhere, to share our culture in English which brought me a lot of fun. Meanwhile, all subjects were in English, my reading speed had been increasing year after year which allowed me to learn much faster. After several years, I gradually realized that my thinking became in English. It is a sign that this language had been a natural tool to me. This tool has substantial importance in my career as I first worked in a US company which required me to work with people from Asia, Europe and America. Good English language allowed me to communicate effectively and work competently. Now though I am in a Chinese firm, English is still critical since we frequently meet non-Chinese counterparties with the globalization and we read English materials most of the time.

Thanks & Regards,  
ZR

## 6. Rui (SM3 2005)

Dear Ms Fong,

Nice to hear that you come back to Singapore. I hope you have had a great trip!

About the short write-up, sure, I would like to. The following is some of my thought and feel.

I remember when I first came to Singapore, language was really the first challenge for me. Luckily I had a chance to go through a bridging course for English practice. I found that six months training was very helpful as I was forced to speak in English which we never experienced when we were learning English back in our country, because we did not have such environment to use the tool. I could still memorize all those discussion on certain subjects such ECO system, society, or even science of sex; role plays; and games from the text books. It helped me build up my confidence of speaking in English.

After that we entered the University to start our bachelor degree learning journey, from which I did start to use English as a tool, for course study, group discussion, report writing, and presentation etc. It was really not easy and I found the different people speak in different versions of English. We have Singlish of course, Indian

English, Vietnam; Cambodia, all speak in their local accents. But I enjoyed talking to them, although it was difficult at the beginning, I just asked them to speak slower, and repeated if I could not catch it. As time went on I did learn many interesting things and history about their countries, and of course, getting more used to their talking.

Now as I graduated from University, I have been living and studying in Singapore for almost six years. How time flies! I went on practicing my English by joining club like Toastmaster to give myself more chances to make speech in public. I went through many interviews for looking for a job, and I could tell that I was getting more used to English. I did presentations sometimes as my job required. It is actually not that difficult if I did prepare well for it. I just need to be very clear about what I am going to present.

However, we are never perfect. Hence the journey of learning English never stops. I just want to make a point that to learn no matter what language it is, the only way is to practice and use it as much as possible. Regardless which level we are, just never stop practicing, we should be confident that one day in the future, sooner or later, we could use it as a tool!

Haha, just some of my ideas, Ms Fong.

As Nov and Dec are going to have more holiday, GY and I will try to visit you at your convenience. Please suggest us when you will be more free and let us arrange.

Best regards,  
RT

# APPENDIX B

## Prompts used in instruments

### Learner diary (9)

*This week/fortnight, what . . .*

events, if any, made you feel satisfied about learning English?

difficulties did you experience, if any?

did you need to adjust to, compared with your previous language learning experience?

do you think about your progress in a particular area, e.g. listening, writing, etc.?

are your thoughts on your present English course, e.g. objectives, materials, activities, etc.?

[Please close the gap here.]learning method/strategy did you try out/use again, if any?

were some things you did on your own or outside of class to learn/practise English?

are some things you would like to know about learning English?

are your learning and practising plans for the next week/fortnight?

*NB If you do need to mention any teacher, please use a pseudonym, e.g. Ms Z.*

### Face-to-face interview (10)

You may choose to answer any number of the following questions.

Interview Question prompts:

- 1 Were you eager to learn? What motivated you in your English learning? [Motivation]

- 2 What do you think of yourself as a language learner? (Be frank and not overly modest.) [Beliefs about themselves as language learners]
- 3 How do you rate your progress? In which areas (e.g. listening, speaking, vocabulary, etc.)? [Evaluation of progress and self-monitoring]
- 4 Is there any difference between learning English here and in China? What are the similarities and differences between Chinese and English? [Differences to learning English in China and in Singapore, and perceptions about language]
- 5 Which aspects of the SM3 course help you to learn best: materials, activities, tests etc.? [Course – how helpful are the various aspects? Norton, 2000, p. 134.]
- 6 How have the teachers helped you in your learning? (Please do NOT mention names; you may choose to use pseudonyms like Ms N.) [Teachers' role]
- 7 What methods or strategies have you found useful in improving your English? Do you use them in or outside class? Or both? [Strategies in and out of class]
- 8 Do you prefer to learn on your own or with someone's help? Would you like to decide on what to learn and how to learn, if given the choice? [Independence/Autonomy]
- 9 How do you feel about English or western culture? [Affective domain, target language and culture, motivation]
- 10 Do you enjoy learning/using English or do you dread it? Why? [Affective factors]

[The *a priori* factors to be elicited by each prompt are given in the parentheses.]

### Email interview (5)

- 1 Describe your English as it was at the start of the bridging course for English. What has changed and what helped you make these changes?
- 2 If you compare your learning of English to a journey, how would you describe where you are now? What are your thoughts and/or feelings on arriving at this point in your learning?
- 3 Can you describe some significant experiences/people during this journey? (For example, related to your environment, studies, professors, friends, hall/co-curricular activities, internships, SEP\*?)
- 4 Looking back on the bridging course,
  - a what did you find most helpful? Or what was your greatest gain?
  - b what did you find most challenging? (For example, Oral Report, Essay?) How do you feel about this aspect now? Why?
  - c what skill(s) and knowledge did you gain overall?
- 5 Based on your experiences during your degree programme and with regard to your English learning,
  - a what did you find most helpful in your degree programme?
  - b what would the most useful advice be to a newly matriculated PRC student on the same programme?

\* Denotes Student Exchange Programme



## Autobiography

Just write naturally your story, about where (which countryside, town or city) you grew up in, maybe something about your family, schools, when you started to learn English, how you felt, what problems and successes you faced etc. Maybe preparing for *Gaokao*. Then coming to bridging course and the four years in NUS, esp. as you shared earlier about your reading and motivation. The recent experiences in NTU would be valuable too. I think this profile of you as a learner will be helpful for other students and teachers like me.

# APPENDIX C

## Tang's autobiography

### English learning journey

I was born in a medium size town in central south China. My father is junior middle school math teacher and my mother is a civil servant. I started learning English in junior middle school. And my mom had placed strong emphasis on my English language education. Acting on the contention that a good beginning is crucial to learning English, she urged me to follow English tapes. Though my parents generally oppose extra tuition, they sent me to one of the few tuition classes I ever had, going through each English phonetic symbols carefully.

One of the key figures that exert strong influence on me about learning English is Li Yang, the founder of Crazy English. He is a strong advocate to learning by listening to native speeches and reading aloud (or perhaps shouting crazily). I cannot remember how many mornings following his advice I read English aloud till my mouth got dry and exhausted.

My junior middle school English teacher encouraged students to learn texts by heart. And I had always been the best one in my class in reciting texts. Though I could recite the text in a nice tone, I had a lot of mispronunciation at that time. Despite the fact that I could pronounce correctly most of the phonetic symbols isolated, I could not do when they came in words. Fully aware of my mistakes, I found it insurmountable to correct myself following the dubiously standard tapes accompany the English textbooks.

After junior middle school, I enrolled into the best senior middle school in my town. In the first semester there, in addition to the regular English class, we had English speaking class, forty minutes per week, taught by a New Zealand lady who was the only foreign teacher at the school. Later, only regular English class, typical test preparation style education, remained. The management of the school was questioned why not let native speakers teach English class. I remember the answers

was that native speakers could not understand Gaokao and its impacts on middle school education.

Through Gaokao, I enrolled into a decent collage in China, where I did not stay for long. Soon I received the offer of scholarship to study in Singapore. My family had no skepticism on the wisdom of accepting the offer. And the education I received at National University of Singapore (NUS) has changed my life radically.

When I first arrived in Singapore, after I spoke up for one sentence or two, local people could immediately tell my origin and always switched to speak Chinese (with the exception to people who could not speak Chinese). The fact that Singaporean spoke Chinese to me came about due to their hospitality and recognition of me as a member of the family of Chinese race. However, that came to me as an embarrassing or painful reminder of my poor English; I reckoned if I could speak Standard English, people would take me as person from an Anglophone country.

Recognizing the limited English language skills and ability of me and fellow scholars, the scholarship program started with intensity English bridge course, which has prepared us for university courses instructed in English. In this six months course, we practiced English conversation between teacher and student and we also had group discussion among the class. This course trained us to write argumentative essays, which was a pain to me for I had trouble to come up examples to argue about the point which can be right or wrong as a matter of degree. As commented by one of my teachers, I also made a lot of spelling errors in writing my exam essays. Included in our course notes, there is one particular essay. It was written by a student in previous batch and is so beautiful and impressive that it has been motivating me to study hard in writing.

Though I did not like writing argumentative essays, I got pretty involved in the English debate in the course. I was not good at defending points but I had no trouble in recognizing the fallacies in an argument. But still it takes language skills and wisdom in pointing out fallacies and refuting the argument. I was not really good at that and only reached the second round in the English debate competition. Nonetheless, I think that was an excellent learning experience for it motivated me to practice articulating myself.

The bridging course also offered us opportunity to practice presentation skills. We had weekly individual reports presented to the class. In addition to that, students, three or four persons per team, carried out a small project that included a survey and we presented our results once to our class and another time to half of the students in the program. The presentation skills acquired, together with team spirit, become vital in many projects I did in university.

In National University of Singapore, I studied physics and I read a lot of books on philosophy and history of science, which has not only improved my reading skills significantly but led me to thinking in English.

In my third year in college, I embarked on student exchange program to US, which is absolutely an Anglophone country. Often, people take it for granted that living in a country like US improves oral English rapidly. Well, that is not true at

least in my case. And I argue that people's accent becomes hard to change as people grow up.

However, few things are unattainable by hard work. And in fact no one could plead age any longer after meeting someone like the following restaurant servant. On entering a Chinese Buddha restaurant in US, I was greeted by a Chinese servant, in his 30s, who spoke in perfect American accent (as far as my hearing concerned). While I was eating, I heard him talking to his colleagues in perfect Chinese. And I reckoned he must have been in US since an early age. When prompted, he told me he had been US for only six months, putting me in wild astonishment. By then, I had been receiving English education for three years and spent nearly one year in US, yet my speeches were still frequently interrupted by "Pardon?" or "ah?" Needless to say, I felt terribly ashamed. I asked him how he learnt English so well. He answered "by diligence".

Ever since then, I have been paying more attentions to learning English. I dusted off learning English materials like New Concept English and Crazy English. I download podcasts from CNN, NBC. In Singapore, I turn on my FM radio to pick up the readily available BBC World Service. When choosing Final Year Project supervisor in NUS, I kept in mind that I should not end up practicing Chinese with people. I chose a professor from Germany, of whose group half do not speak Chinese. The other half, of course, spoke Chinese to me on welcoming me into the lab. But I insisted on speaking English and soon they accepted it. During my year long project, they bore with confusions resulted from my blurred English. And I am grateful to many corrections they made to my language.

Recently, I embarked on the task of searching for room rental in Singapore, consequently made quite a number of phone calls and I was glad to find that I am gradually getting rid of Chinese accent in my English. Some people I called suspected I was an Indian. Once, I called a senior lady, to whom I told multiple times that I am from China. She could not believe it. After I dispelled any doubts by speaking Chinese, she told me she thought I was from France.

By the way, I am not in denial of my race, nationality or identity. I feel proud of being Chinese, for we are diligent people. And we will be better off if we can speak Standard English.

But France is notorious for poor English. One day, I believe, I will hear from the other end of the line "I though you were from U.S."

Sep 12, 2010

# APPENDIX D

## The Bridging Course

To give the reader a sense of the learning context that the Chinese students experienced during the Bridging Course (BC), I provide in this appendix an overview of the objectives, format, activities, assessment, schedule and course content. To balance this formal framework, I will also describe their life outside of National University of Singapore (NUS).

### The BC in NUS

For the 2006 Senior Middle 3 (SM3; 14th Batch) students, their BC ran for twenty-three weeks from January to June. In Centre for English Language Communication (CELC), each SM3/SM2 programme is headed by an Administrative Coordinator and a Materials Coordinator. While the Administrative Coordinator looks after the interests of students and tutors, and liaises with the Ministry of Education (MOE), NUS administration and CELC management for the smooth running of the course, the Materials Coordinator plans the syllabus and activities and selects the textbooks and supplementary materials.

The homepage for the BC captured the following information regarding the objectives, format, activities and assessment of the course (SM3 Intensive English Programme, 2004).

### Objectives

Overall, the objective of the course was to raise the level of English proficiency of SM3 students from the entry secondary one level to secondary four level. The specific objectives of the course were to

- Upgrade students' communicative competence through developing their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, and widening their grammatical structures and vocabulary usage
- Familiarise students with English for academic purposes by inculcating skills in report writing, argumentation, oral presentation, etc.
- Equip students with intercultural communicative competence, which is vital for effective communication in a multi-cultural setting

### **Format, activities and assessment**

The whole cohort of 2006 SM3 students were divided into eight groups of about 21, each taught by four or five teachers. The groups met Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm, with a lunch break of 1.5 hours, for lessons and activities. Besides using textbooks and other course materials, all students participated in two projects: (a) an academic group project culminating in a report and a project presentation, and (b) a series of three events comprising a story telling competition, an essay competition and a debate series. These activities were aimed at providing students with opportunities to use the language skills in different contexts, and also at keeping the students' motivation at a high level.

A number of interesting activities were planned for the programme, including Learning Journeys to Kampong Glam and New Water plant. Tutors of each group also organised hospitality programmes: visits to scenic spots in Singapore, dinner at the tutor's home, participation in cultural programmes, etc.

There were five exams/tests in the course: pre-test, preliminary test, two progress tests and post-test. The pre-test and post-test were comparable to the "O" level exam. The preliminary test was comparable to a Singapore secondary 1 level test. The two progress tests were comparable to secondary 2 level and secondary 3 level tests respectively.

### **Schedule and content**

In addition to the homepage, the Tutors' Handbook for 2006 also gives a week-by-week breakdown of lessons and activities of the syllabus. This provides a framework for conducting the course over two phases. Reproduced below are two tables from the handbook: Table E.1 is a summary of the course schedule and content while Table E.2 reflects a typical week in the SM3 programme.

### **Outside the bridging course in NUS**

Where did these students live and what did they do outside of the bridging course? Did they have any opportunity to interact with the larger community beyond their SM3 group and cohort, and their teachers? When they were on campus, the students

**TABLE E.1** Summary of course schedule and content

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Tests</i>	<i>Major Activities</i>	<i>Textbooks Used</i>
<b>Phase 1 (Proficiency)</b>	Weeks 1–11 (03.01.06–17.03.06)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-Test [04.01.06 (written) &amp; 05.01.06 (oral)]</li> <li>• Preliminary Test (13.01.06)</li> <li>• Progress Test 1 (03.03.06)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning Journey 1 (27.01.06)</li> <li>• Class Story- telling (27.02.06)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tapestry 3: Listening/ Speaking (T L/S)</li> <li>• Tapestry 3: Reading (T R)</li> <li>• Developing Composition Skills (R &amp; G)</li> <li>• General English (GE)</li> <li>• Further Communication Strategies (F Com)</li> </ul>
Recess	Week 8 (22.02.06–24.02.06)			
	Week 16 (17.04.06–21.04.06)			
<b>Phase 2 (Proficiency &amp; EAP)</b>	Weeks 12–23 20.03.06–09.06.06)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progress Test 2 (28.04.06)</li> <li>• Post-Test (09.06.06 oral &amp; written)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning Journey 2 (19.05.06)</li> <li>• Debate (26.05.06)</li> <li>• Project Presentation (01.06.06)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grammar Review (Grammar R)</li> <li>• Supplementary Materials (Supp)</li> </ul>

**TABLE E.2** Schedule for Week 4 of the 2006 SM3 Course*Week 4**Theme in Focus: Computer & the Internet*

23.01.06	Mon	R & G Ch2/pp. 28–50 Narrating: paragraph <b>As: P45–46 Do writing assignment 2: Point of View</b>	
24.01.06	Tue	The structure of an essay supp pp. 60–70 Grammar R: R & G Ch1/pp. 215–220 Dependent clauses, subordinators & connecting words <b>As: Write an essay</b>	Supp reading: Crying for Help on the Internet Digital World: a gapped text supp pp. 71–78
25.01.06	Wed	Computer helpline (see teachers' manual pp. 16–18 for dialogue/teaching procedures) Pronunciation Practice (2) vowels supp p.79 Grammar R: R & G Ch2/pp. 221–227: Simple past for narrating/Simple present for explaining Used to and would Adverbial Clauses of Time	<b>MOE activities</b>
26.01.06	Thu	T R Ch2 Theme: IT Skill: Keeping a vocabulary log Skills: Identifying a writer's audience & purpose Use of figurative language <b>As: Review/Categorise voc learnt in this week. Prepare for oral report</b>	
27.01.06	Fri	Internet Dilemma & Supp Reading: Cyberdating (supp pp. 80–86) <b>As: Listen/read and share</b>	Learning Journey 1 Kampong Glam (Materials to be collected from OAB General Office)



would have opportunities to interact with local and international students in the canteens, libraries, computer rooms, bookshops and printshops. For their accommodation, the MOE had arranged for the scholars to be housed at a commercially run hostel. Each weekday, chartered buses ferried the students to and from the hostel. It can be presumed that the students had to interact with the hostel staff. The weekends were unscheduled time so the students were free to explore places of interest in larger Singapore. Many of them did venture out of the hostel to have a taste of local life, and they reported on these experiences in their learner diaries or shared these experiences with me informally. Some of these scholars also had contacts in Singapore, such as relatives, family friends, alumni from their former universities or high schools, etc., who had lived here for some time. Through their explorations and contacts, the scholars' interaction with Singapore society did expand beyond NUS and the hostel.

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