

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Teaching Effectiveness Revisited: A Narrative Inquiry into the English Proficiency of an International Student in the U.S.

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Abstract

Employing narrative inquiry, this research study investigates the English-using experience of an international student from China in an American graduate school, and presents how his inadequate English proficiency, especially communicative competence, has affected his academic learning and non-academic aspects of life. It vividly unfurls how the participant's lack of communicative competence, profoundly influenced by China's EFL teaching, has prevented him from achieving a greater academic success and adjustment into American life. The perceived need for communicative competence underlines a vital call for enacting the Communicative Language Teaching approach in EFL classrooms. While gaining valuable insights into China's EFL teaching effectiveness, this narrative inquiry has the potential to transcend national boundaries, spark global concerns, and provide important implications for the EFL educators around the world. This unique perspective of examining EFL teaching effectiveness can also shed light on how to help EFL students become more linguistically proficient and socio-culturally empowered in authentic English-speaking environment.

Keyword: narrative inquiry, English-using experience, EFL teaching effectiveness, Communicative Language Teaching

Introduction

It was estimated that in 2012 there were approximately 914 million people around the world who speak English, among whom; 331 million were English-as-a-first-language speakers (Exploredia, 2011). This means that for 2/3 of the people speaking English worldwide, English was their second or foreign language. As the globe becomes more and more interdependent, we can foresee that the number of people speaking English as the lingua franca will keep expanding, and accordingly, teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) will continue to remain an issue of crucial importance in many EFL countries.

Where the EFL teaching effectiveness is concerned, historically, the predominant tool of assessing students' learning outcome is through testing, which is characterized by the discrete-point, structurally based knowledge about the language. As students come to an English-speaking environment, their previous testing results, more often than not, appear not a true indication of their English proficiency, nor are they a true reflection of the status quo of EFL instruction they have received (Liang, 2003).

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As more and more international students pour into American higher education, how sufficient their English proficiency is in allowing them to function in both academic and social life in English-speaking environment provides a unique perspective to understand EFL countries' English language teaching effectiveness.

Of all the EFL countries, China has the most students enrolled in the colleges and universities in the U.S. According to *China Daily*, the most authoritative and widely circulated English-language newspaper in China, more than 300 million Chinese are studying English, accounting for about a quarter of China's population, and it is likely that the number of English-speaking Chinese will outnumber the populations of all English-speaking countries in the world, combined (China Daily, 2011). Through unpacking how a Chinese student's English proficiency has impacted his academic study and social life in the U.S., it is hopeful that this paper will provide EFL educators with some food for thought in preparing students to better meet the challenges of using English as the world language.

Literature Review

Plentiful research studies have ensued from the growing presence of international students in English-speaking countries, examining various topics about their English-related issues and using diverse methodological and theoretical frameworks (Cheng, Myles, & Curtis, 2004; Tatar, 2005; Zhang & Mi, 2010; Shi, 2011). In these research studies, international students have often been reported to have experienced a wide range of challenges from culture shock, different learning styles, lack of language skills, etc. (Halic, Greenberg, & Paulus, 2009; McMahan, 2011; Sakthivel, 2003; Wen & Clement, 2003). Among these challenges, English proficiency is always identified as one of the biggest that prevents students from achieving a greater academic success and adjustment to the life and culture of the host country (Edwards, Ran, & Li, 2007; Hellsten & Prescott, 2004; Huang, 2006; Zhu, 2003).

However, not much existing literature has tied the English proficiency of international students in the U.S. to the EFL instruction they received back in their home countries for the purpose of informing EFL teachers and researchers on how to improve EFL teaching effectiveness, not to mention employing narrative inquiry as the methodology that examines international students' language-using experiences (Wei, 2013, 2016). Therefore, different from the previous research studies on EFL teaching effectiveness, this paper intends to investigate this topic from the angle of a Chinese international student's English proficiency and English-using experience in the U.S., in hopes of shedding light on the EFL teaching pedagogy in not only China but also other EFL countries sharing similar foreign language teaching situations.

Methodology

This research employs narrative inquiry as the methodology. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), "(t)he study of narrative, is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (p. 2). Experience is the stories people live, and stories are the closest form that can research experience. People by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives and in telling them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new stories. The responsibility of narrative researchers of education is hence to describe such stories, collect and tell stories of them, and writes narratives of experience, in order for stories, lived and told, relived and retold, to educate the self and others in a larger educational landscape in a meaningful way. It may not promise immediate practical benefits, yet it places the highest value on individuality, originality, and ownership by giving the maximum voice to participants.

The participant of this narrative inquiry, Xue, is a third-year male student in his late 20s who is pursuing his Ph.D. in Science in a graduate school in a Southwestern state of the U.S. Before coming to America, he received school instruction of English in China for approximately 10 years. To gain an understanding of his English proficiency in academic settings, it is important that I document and portray his everyday experience using English at the school through observation. The observation settings include the classroom lectures, seminars, group discussions, and lab meetings, where I directly went with the participant, observing how he interacted with others using English, equipped with a pad and a pencil to take field notes. Additionally, three interviews were conducted with the participant, with each interview being approximately one hour. To allow him to better express himself, all the interviews were conducted in Chinese, the participant's native language, tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then translated into English in their entirety.

All in all, the field texts of this study derive from field notes, thick descriptions, interview transcripts, a range of personal communications such as follow-up emails, on-line chatting, observations at social gatherings and chance encounters, and informal conversations conducted face-to-face or via telephone. All these narrative sources are associated with each other and complement each other in transforming the field texts into research texts.

In normatively coding the research texts, the particularities of the participant, personal and concrete, are embedded into something broad and generic, shaping a major storyline of his English-using experience in America, as the session that follows unfolds.

Stories Lived and Told

Since the first day at school in the U.S. when he participated in the Orientation, Xue has begun to intensely realize how poor his listening comprehension is. In his own words, "all I could do in the Orientation was guessing." There were always a couple of words in a sentence he could understand. It was simply through these discrete words, together with the speaker's gestures, handouts, and common sense at times that he was scarcely able to grasp the gist of the Orientation. His difficulty with listening comprehension persisted in the classes taken in the graduate school, and he found that the degree of difficulty varied depending on the instructors. When an instructor was from a non-English-speaking country and spoke English with an accent, he tended to have a bigger trouble understanding him/her, because he was never exposed to an English variety different from British or American English while learning English in China.

Luckily, there were PP slides and handouts available from the instructors, through which, Xue could teach himself after the class, and make up for what was missed in the class. He recalled that it was really a tough period of time when he had to study by himself all over again what was taught during the day after he was home from school each evening, while his native English-speaking peers could spend this time reinforcing the learning or simply relaxing.

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

When asked about his "silence" in a subsequent interview, he made the following remark; I don't have the response rate quick enough to catch up to others' speech, raising questions or responding to others' questions. Even though I get others' questions and know the answers, when I'm ready to speak after organizing my thoughts into grammatically correct sentences, it has already been answered by someone else or some other questions have been put forward and under discussion.

When he did speak, he spoke with a large difficulty, exhibiting great hesitancy, uncertainty, effort, and errors. He attributed the speaking difficulty to the way English was taught in China, as he said in an interview. The former English learning has left me a shadow. It placed too much emphasis on grammar. Now when it comes to speaking, I will be very concerned about grammar. The more I'm concerned about them, the more likely I am getting stuck.

As the narrative research deepens, I obtained a more complete understanding of his English proficiency. Generally speaking, he could only use simple language with a certain degree of accuracy, and his speech was restrained by limited vocabulary. When it was about a familiar topic, he could ask and answer simple questions, respond to simple statements, and maintain simple conversations. When prepared, he could ask questions and make statements with reasonable accuracy. However, when trying to express somewhat complex ideas, he may have to pause a lot. Time concepts would seem vague, vocabulary would become inaccurate or inappropriate, and grammatical errors would become fairly common though not quite preventing him from being understood. His pronunciation, stress, and intonation were heavily influenced by Chinese. Misunderstandings occurred occasionally due to his pronunciation, but he could ask for clarification to verify comprehension.

One interesting phenomenon discovered was that he appeared more comfortable having one-on-one conversations than multi-party communications. He was very easily silenced when facing a group of people, whereas in two-party communications the interlocutor may be more conscious of his second language speaker status, speak at a slower pace, in a clearer voice, and try not to use slang or complex sentences. Therefore, he always preferred to join one-on-one conversations rather than group ones whenever possible.

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

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

In Xue's opinion, shortage of vocabulary was an important reason for his difficulty with listening comprehension. What was very ironic was that vocabulary was always at the core of English teaching and learning in China, together with grammar. The English classes he took in China were all focused on vocabulary and grammatical structures. A typical assignment, as he recalled, was reading and writing the texts over and over again until he was able to recite and write them from the memory. He spent numerous hours remembering vocabulary and even the whole textbook, but still had difficulties telling what a word means accurately as he only remembered vocabulary for the sake of remembering instead of using them to convey a specific meaning in context. English was never Xue's favorite subject, because reciting things was not his strong point according to him, though he worked hard, and performed fairly well on whatever tests given while he was in China. In his own words, he "couldn't see much fun and sense of achievement in remembering English vocabulary, dialogues, and sentences. Because you could get a good score as long as you remember them, there was no experience of challenge or excitement in learning English which could be otherwise received in the process of solving mathematical problems." When the middle school he went to required each student to select one subject for after-school interest development, he did not give any thought to English.

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

His supervisor had been very displeased with his English proficiency. He once said that when Xue first came to the lab and met him, Xue kept nodding for whatever he said which misled him into believing that Xue's English was fine. However, he later found that this was not true at all. On the contrary, Xue may not have understood anything he said. Xue did not know if his supervisor regretted having him in the lab, but he did know that his supervisor had pointed out his deficiency in English on many different occasions. When I asked him whether he remembered what his supervisor said about his English, he nodded very affirmatively, "Of course. He explicitly told me that if my English proficiency didn't get improved, I would have trouble passing the Qualifying Exam which is in oral form."

He added that his supervisor even offered to pay private ESL classes for him to attend, but somehow this proposition did not work out. Instead, his supervisor used lab funding to buy him a “Rosetta Stone,” a language learning software at the price of \$159.

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

Because this conversation group was still in a pilot stage, rather than promoting it among campus-wide students, the organizers only distributed the advertising message to the faculty, letting them “nominate” the students they thought need to improve their English. Fortunately, as well as unfortunately, Xue was “suggested” by both his supervisor and Department Chair that he participates. He thus became one of the 20 students at the whole university who had the “honor” to be “nominated” to be part of this pilot English Conversation Group. I used “fortunately” and “unfortunately” simultaneously to describe this experience of Xue. It was “fortunate” because thanks to it he gained an opportunity to practice his communicative competence in English; it was “unfortunate” because his communicative skills were obviously considered “needing to be improved” by both his supervisor and Department Chair. Another note worth mentioning is that according to Due, over one half of the 20 students in this conversation group were Chinese, which may imply that among all the non native-English-speaking students in Xue’s graduate school, Chinese students’ English proficiency is generally concerning.

Xue placed a great hope on this English Conversation Group in improving his English communicative competence. Additionally, he was trying to spare two to three hours a week from his tight experimental schedule to take the free English classes offered by a church. The deficiency in communicative competence has made him suffer the pressure from many aspects—all key to his academic development in the U.S.—passing the Qualifying Exam, fully achieving his potential in academic study and career, and making daily communication easier.

China’s EFL Teaching: Anything but Communicative

After studying English for so many years in China, instead of being proficient in English, Xue faced immense challenges of using English to communicate. His inability to transform the linguistic knowledge learnt in China’s classroom into communicative competence stands out very evidently through telling, living, retelling, and reliving his experience of using English in the U.S. His limited English communicative skills not only restricted his opportunities of obtaining learning resources and academic success, but also made his daily life more difficult. In other words, he is very insufficiently prepared for the communicative competence required for not only the academic and career development but also the social life in the English-speaking contexts.

In general, in describing and deciphering Xue’s experiences, three specific themes are brought to light that will hopefully shed light on China’s EFL teaching (a) shortage of vocabulary, (b) accuracy over fluency, and (c) testing-oriented assessment system. These themes reflect the most distinct problems in China’s EFL teaching that have resulted in Xue’s insufficient communicative competence, which will be delineated as follows.

Shortage of Vocabulary

Xue’s speech in English is very restrained by the limit of vocabulary. He is always plagued with finding the words he wants to say. Ironically, as Xue noted, classroom instruction in China has traditionally attached great importance to vocabulary. Xue’s experience calls the efficiency of China’s vocabulary teaching into a serious question. The fact that Xue, though being able to memorize the whole textbook, and even tell in what place a specific word appeared in the textbook, still had difficulties remembering what these words meant, fully reveals that, rote learning, the most frequently used strategy for learning vocabulary in China, is problematic. Fundamentally, it is like studying vocabulary for the sake of studying vocabulary, instead of for any real use. If a word learned is not to be used for the purpose of communication, in either oral or written form, it will be very easily forgotten. Therefore, rote learning the vocabulary alone does not necessarily lead to language proficiency, and is not an effective way of learning vocabulary.

This is partly why EFL students, though taught to memorize a large vocabulary, still tend to find their vocabulary considerably inadequate when using them in the U.S. Another important issue that has been long overlooked in EFL vocabulary instruction is the limited varieties of the vocabulary taught. Xue commented that he was taught to remember a large number of words he described as “awkward,” because these words were rarely even used in his life in the U.S. In contrast, the words that are very commonly used in daily life seem to be unfamiliar to him, no matter how simple and basic these words are. He felt that he needed a good knowledge of collocation, phrasal verbs, colloquial expressions and idioms, so that he can manage to handle the everyday communication.

This finding provides some important implications to EFL educators: (a) Vocabulary should be acquired through being put in different contexts for communication; and (b) students should be exposed to different language styles and registers because eventually they need to have a repertoire of various registers of the language to meet the various needs of real-life communication rather than just one, the formal written one.

Accuracy over fluency

In addition to the shortage of vocabulary, Unattributed his poor English proficiency to his obsession with preconceived importance of producing flawless utterances and the fear of making mistakes in front of the public. He remarked, “Before asking questions, I have to think about how to ask it in English, make sure that the grammar is right and I don’t make mistakes [in terms of language], and keep repeating the question over and over again in my mind before I finally find my courage and raise it.” The more he is afraid of making mistakes, the more difficult it becomes for him to speak out. Because he is too much constrained by the formal considerations of the language, he needs more time to consider in the brain how to transform the ideas correctly into language. During this process, he finds himself always having to try to search for the exact language forms from Chinese which are precisely equivalent to those in English. This transformation is not only laborious, but also always turns out ineffective. The over emphasis on linguistic forms rather than meaning, to a large extent, results in his communication difficulty, and the production and exchange of less information, thus slowing down the flow of conversation.

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

Therefore, the issue of over-correction is worthy of the introspection of EFL teachers, researchers, and policy makers: Should we put the focal point on accuracy or fluency? If it is hard to achieve both, do we want our students to end up being hampered from speaking even being mute intimidated by “accuracy,” or expressing themselves freely in spite of some minor errors that do not obstruct mutual understanding? Are these errors so important to the point that they must be corrected immediately? Between seeking zero language errors and encouraging students to become effective communicators, which one should we opt for?

Testing-oriented assessment system

In China, passing a series of obligatory exams so as to be promoted to a higher level of education is the major tool of measuring students’ academic success, which is also the biggest driving force for Chinese students to study English. Especially in secondary schools, everything serves the College Entrance Exam because it is the single determining factor of whether a student can enter a higher education institution and what institution he or she can enter. At the post-secondary level, all students are required to pass the College English Test Band 4 which is considered by the majority of the universities as a must for obtaining a Bachelor’s degree.

College English Test Band 6 is taken on a voluntary basis, but is highly valued in the job market. All these tests are nationwide, administered by the National Testing Committees on behalf of the Chinese Ministry of Education. Besides the tests for academic purpose, even the employers working for government-supported institutions need to take English tests when seeking for promotion. All these tests are based on the mastery of linguistic form. Due to the demands of these high-stakes tests, both school curriculum and classroom instruction regard preparing students' test-taking techniques as the priority rather than students' ability to use the language to communicate. With teachers and students both driven solely by this instrumental motivation, the goal of language teaching and learning has been disoriented (Choi, 2008). As one of the best test takers in China, Xue's English-using experience in the U.S. has shown that the assessment system in China has been designed to go anywhere but the development of students' communicative competence which they need most in English-speaking environment.

A Call for the Communicative Language Teaching Approach

This narrative inquiry into Xue's experience of using English in the U.S. clearly uncovers that China's EFL teaching does not meet students' needs for communication. Hu (2005) pointed out that "(t)wo widely used methodologies in particular have been held accountable for students' lack of communicative competence in English after studying it for years" in China (p. 153). One is the grammar-translation method, and the other is audio lingualism, both characterized by systematic and detailed analysis of grammar, and the accuracy in language production (Hu, 2005).

Despite the lip service paid to communication, "the actual training in listening and speaking skills remain largely a goal on paper" (Zhang & Mi, 2010, p. 384), and the EFL teaching in China still "focuses heavily on language knowledge, not language skills, with the former being defined in terms of grammar and vocabulary and being taught predominantly in the mother tongue and through textbook material and grammar exercises" (Zhang & Mi, 2010, p. 383). The opportunities to practice using the language to communicate are very limited in the classroom. What many teachers called communication is more often than not the oral drilling of the target structures, preselected discrete lexical or grammatical items, rather than the "authentic," "natural," or "genuine" production of the language.

In this globally competitive context with English as the lingua franca, EFL students may very well be impeded from reaching the height of success they could have reached because of an inadequate English proficiency, especially communicative competence. This narrative inquiry reflects a significant call for the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in EFL countries.

CLT enables students and teachers to create a learning community for a common goal, that is, communicative competence. In this community, "teachers are expected to be facilitators of communication, needs analysts, organizers of resources, guides of procedures and activities, researchers, and learners, while learners are required to be negotiators, communicators, discoverers, and contributors of knowledge and information" (cited by Feryok, 2008, p. 154). In teaching the linguistic forms, the underlying aim is to cultivate the communicative functions the linguistic forms carry in different contexts. Learners are given ample opportunities to engage in interactions and perform communicative tasks using these linguistic forms learned in a way that is learner-centered and content-driven. The involvement in the communicative activities is not only a vital source of linguistic input but also a tool to facilitate language acquisition. In this fashion, CLT allows larger doses of language input, greater learner autonomy, authentic interactions, more relevant learning content, and hence stronger communicative competence.

Moreover, CLT highlights the importance of using the target language exclusively or predominantly in promoting language acquisition, which maximizes the amount of exposure to the target language in EFL classrooms. In EFL countries that lack genuine English communicative contexts, creating an atmosphere that uses the language for communication within the class becomes especially essential. It is a key tenet of CLT to build the classroom as the main source of linguistic input and the primary site of language development. In this regard, CLT is particularly relevant in the foreign language context, where students have limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom. Furthermore, it can effectively develop students' enthusiasm and intrinsic motivation for learning English in EFL contexts instead of reducing English learning to a product of curricular demands, pressure from exams, academic and professional success.

In summary, in response to students' perceived need for communicative competence and an increasingly pragmatic demand for the English language, traditional EFL teaching methods can no longer suffice. Nevertheless, enacting CLT does not exclude the use of traditional teaching methods. Instead, EFL teaching should be eclectic and localized for CLT to yield the greatest benefits to EFL countries. Beaumont and Chang (2011) once challenged the dichotomy between the traditional and communicative approaches, arguing that what is the most helpful for teachers is to "define more precisely what it is they are doing in the classroom, how that might be justified in terms of language learning outcomes, ..." (p. 299). Further research needs to be conducted to explore a workable blend of both CLT and traditional teaching methods in EFL contexts.

Concluding Remarks

Utilizing narrative inquiry, this study delineates language-related experiences on an individual case basis which is difficult to achieve using other methods. The depth and richness of the stories have made visible the dynamics and complexity of human experiences. Although a narrative inquiry makes no attempt to generalize, the call for CLT is not specific to China's EFL teaching; instead, it transcends national boundaries and sparks global concerns, as "it opens the door for researchers in other nations to begin to explore a similar phenomenon in their national contexts" (Clandinin & Hamilton, 2010, p. 1115).

According to Bruner (1990), a good story should be open to different interpretations, letting different people fill in the gaps with their own experiences and knowledge. Conle (2000) echoed this viewpoint by arguing that it is essential for narrative inquiry that "whatever sense of closure may convey the end of a narrative, it must remain open-ended and available for re-telling, by the inquirer or by others" (p. 53). Therefore, it is my hope that this narrative inquiry, as it prompts living, telling, reliving, and retelling of the stories of numerous other EFL learners, will provide EFL educators with a refreshed lens to examine EFL teaching effectiveness in a wider global context.

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