



The University of  
**Nottingham**

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Fong, Yoke Sim (2014) Learners in transition: a longitudinal study of seven People's Republic of China students at the National University of Singapore. PhD thesis, University of Nottingham.

**Access from the University of Nottingham repository:**

<http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/27832/1/FONG%20Yoke%20Sim%20PhD%20Thesis%20FINAL%20December%202014.pdf>

**Copyright and reuse:**

The Nottingham ePrints service makes this work by researchers of the University of Nottingham available open access under the following conditions.

This article is made available under the University of Nottingham End User licence and may be reused according to the conditions of the licence. For more details see:  
[http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/end\\_user\\_agreement.pdf](http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/end_user_agreement.pdf)

**A note on versions:**

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the repository url above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact [eprints@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@nottingham.ac.uk)

**LEARNERS IN TRANSITION: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF  
SEVEN PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA STUDENTS AT  
THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE**

**FONG, YOKE SIM, MSc**

**Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**DECEMBER 2014**

## **ABSTRACT**

This doctorate thesis reports on a qualitative research project to investigate the English learning experiences of seven People's Republic of China (PRC) students during nearly five years of studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS). The research questions for this longitudinal, multiple-case study are:

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

For the purpose of triangulation, four instruments were used to collect data in two stages. In the students' first year in NUS, the instruments were learner diaries and face-to-face interviews while those used in the students' final year, were email interviews and an autobiography. This research design facilitated the broad to narrow approach adopted for the study, and made possible the collection of increasingly more in-depth data.

The analysis of the initial data, through coding, categorising and summarising, was carried out alongside the collection of the later data, similar to the grounded theory approach. However, this study also started with some a priori categories culled from literature and a decade's teaching and research experience associated with PRC students.

The findings indicate that the traditional Chinese culture of learning as well as the NUS L2 context had an influence on the seven participants' key learner characteristics. These students underwent a variety of transitions in their beliefs, strategies, motivation, affective dimension, and identity, agency and investment. However, certain aspects of their key learner characteristics also remained stable. Based on these findings, pedagogical implications were drawn and limitations stated to teachers of PRC learners to better equip themselves and their students to successfully navigate the latter's transition from EFL to ESL/EIL contexts.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

How do you thank someone who has taken you on as her doctorate student and who has stuck with you through thick and thin for a decade? Professor Rebecca Hughes has been my main supervisor since September 2004. Her intellect, creativity and dynamism inspired and challenged me. Her encouragement, help and confidence in me kept me on course especially when the going was hard. I can only express my profound and sincere thanks for her journeying with me till the completion of this project.

To Dr Juliet Thondhlana, who joined the supervisory team in 2008, my deep and heartfelt thanks too for quickly picking up on my project and providing support and guidance ever since. Her unclouded and down-to-earth perspective was invaluable in helping me focus, whether it was on the trees or the woods of longitudinal research.

I must be one of the rare students who have had four supervisors over the course of their candidature. In 2009 and 2010, I had the privilege of consulting with Professor Liz Hamp-Lyons prior to her retirement. Since 2011, Associate Professor Barbara Sinclair has been on the supervisory team and has rendered valuable help towards the completion of this project.

The next persons I wish to acknowledge are my former PRC students who inspired me with their determination and vision. My special thanks to the “Superlative Seven” whose generosity made this project possible. It was my privilege to journey alongside them and to share the landscape of their inner world during their sojourn in NUS.

For friends and colleagues who have encouraged me throughout this journey, they are too numerous to be named individually but I will always be deeply thankful for them. As for my past and present Directors and Deputy Directors at CELC, I owe a

debt of gratitude for the moral support and practical help they have extended to me during the whole course of my project.

Family support has been immensely important to me; my siblings took over my part in the care of our mother whenever I travelled to the Nottingham or Ningbo campus. Mother herself has been understanding of my need to travel and to spend an inordinate amount of time on my “studies”. For Father, I recall his memory with tenderness; with his love for reading and aptitude for languages, he was my earliest example and my inspiration for choosing the path of literary and academic pursuits.

Ultimately, I offer my greatest thanks to God, my Heavenly Father, who has granted me my heart’s desire to undertake this project: the opportunity to do it, the wonderful help I received, the wisdom and the perseverance. To Him be the glory!

**LEARNERS IN TRANSITION: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF SEVEN  
PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA STUDENTS AT THE NATIONAL  
UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE**

**LIST OF CONTENTS**

| <b>CONTENTS</b>   | <b>Page</b> |
|---|-------------|
| <b>Abstract</b>   | <b>ii</b>   |
| <b>Acknowledgements</b>   | <b>iii</b>  |
| <b>List Of Contents</b>   | <b>v</b>    |
| <b>List Of Abbreviations</b>                                    | <b>ix</b>   |
| <b>List Of Figures</b>  | <b>x</b>    |
| <b>List Of Tables</b>   | <b>x</b>    |
| <b>INTRODUCTION</b>   | <b>1</b>    |
| A Snapshot of My PhD Journey                                    | 1           |
| • Embarkation   | 1           |
| • The Original Research Design                                  | 3           |
| • Significant Milestones  | 6           |
| • Research Questions  | 9           |
| A Decade of Journeying with PRC Learners                        | 10          |
| My Own Journey as Learner, Teacher and Researcher               | 16          |
| <b>Chapter 1: REVIEW OF LITERATURE</b>                          | <b>28</b>   |
| 1.1 “The Chinese Learner” and the “Chinese Culture of Learning” | 28          |
| 1.1.1 Affirmation   | 28          |
| 1.1.2 Dissent   | 33          |
| 1.1.3 Winds of Change   | 39          |
| 1.1.4   |             |
| 1.2 The Chinese Learner in Study-abroad Contexts                | 43          |
| 1.2.1 Singapore Settings  | 45          |
| 1.2.2 Western Contexts  | 49          |
| 1.3 Summing Up  | 57          |

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>Chapter 2: METHODOLOGY</b>   | <b>58</b>  |
| 2.1 Qualitative Research  | 58         |
| 2.2 Focal Participants  | 63         |
| 2.3 Choice of Instruments   | 66         |
| 2.3.1 Learner Diaries   | 67         |
| 2.3.2 Interviews  | 69         |
| 2.3.2.1 Transcription   | 73         |
| 2.3.3 Autobiography and Case Studies  | 75         |
| 2.4 Research Design and Timeline  | 79         |
| 2.4.1 Stage 1: Learner Diary and Face-to-face Interview                                   | 81         |
| 2.4.2 Stage 2: Email Interview and Autobiography  | 88         |
| 2.5 Analysis  | 93         |
| 2.5.1 Coding of Data  | 93         |
| 2.5.2 Themes: From Ten to Seven   | 98         |
| 2.5.3 Themes, Sub-themes and Data Samples   | 102        |
| <br>  |            |
| <b>Chapter 3: TRADITIONAL CHINESE CULTURE OF LEARNING (TCCL) AND NUS LEARNING CONTEXT</b> | <b>106</b> |
| 3.1 Traditional Chinese Culture of Learning (TCCL)  | 106        |
| 3.1.1 Participants' Comments on TCCL  | 107        |
| 3.1.2 The Focal Participants as TCCL Learners   | 110        |
| 3.1.2.1 The importance of Vocabulary  | 111        |
| 3.1.2.2 Belief in Effort for Achievement  | 112        |
| 3.1.2.3 The Participants as Active Learners   | 113        |
| 3.2 NUS Learning Context  | 116        |
| 3.2.1 Pre-matriculation: Bridging Course (BC)   | 117        |
| 3.2.1.1 Curriculum  | 117        |
| 3.2.1.2 Community   | 121        |
| 3.2.2 Post-matriculation: Undergraduate Degree Programme (UDP)                            | 122        |
| 3.2.2.1 Curriculum  | 122        |
| • Student Exchange Programme (SEP) and Internship Programme (IP)                          | 126        |
| • Final Year Project (FYP)  | 129        |
| 3.2.2.2 Community   | 130        |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>Chapter 4: MOTIVATION, BELIEFS AND STRATEGIES</b>                         | <b>132</b> |
| 4.1 Motivation from a Multi-faceted Perspective                              | 132        |
| 4.1.1 Significant People   | 133        |
| 4.1.2 Instrumental-Integrative Motivation                                    | 139        |
| 4.1.3 The Motivated Self   | 147        |
| 4.1.4 Loss of Motivation   | 153        |
| 4.2 Beliefs  | 157        |
| 4.2.1 Effort   | 157        |
| 4.2.2 Vocabulary   | 160        |
| 4.2.3 Grammar  | 161        |
| 4.2.4 Nature of Language, Communication and<br>Language Learning             | 163        |
| 4.2.5 L2 Context   | 166        |
| 4.3 Strategies   | 168        |
| 4.3.1 Natural Approach   | 169        |
| 4.3.2 Deliberate Approach  | 171        |
| 4.3.3 A Combination of Natural and Deliberate<br>Approaches                  | 175        |
| <b>Chapter 5: AFFECTIVE DOMAIN, IDENTITY, AGENCY AND<br/>INVESTMENT</b>      | <b>180</b> |
| 5.1 Affective Domain   | 180        |
| 5.1.1 Happiness  | 182        |
| 5.1.2 Fear/Unease  | 184        |
| 5.1.3 Confidence   | 186        |
| 5.1.4 Shame  | 189        |
| 5.2 Identity, Agency and Investment  | 192        |
| 5.2.1 Identity   | 193        |
| 5.2.2 Agency and Investment  | 199        |
| 5.2.3 Empowerment  | 203        |
| 5.3 Summing Up   | 206        |
| <b>Chapter 6: DISCUSSION AND PEDAGOGICAL<br/>IMPLICATIONS</b>                | <b>210</b> |
| 6.1 Discussion of Learner Characteristics and Transitions                    | 212        |
| 6.1.1 Culture: Foundational but not All-encompassing                         | 212        |
| 6.1.2 The NUS Learning Context: Opportunities and<br>Empowerment             | 215        |
| 6.1.3 Beliefs and Strategies: Enlarging the Vision and<br>Fueling the Action | 216        |



|   |            |
|---|------------|
| 6.1.4 Motivation and Identity: The Power of Real and Imagined Communities | 220        |
| 6.1.5 The Affective Domain: The Trajectory of Emotions                    | 226        |
| 6.2 Pedagogical Implications  | 228        |
| 6.2.1 Equipping the Teacher and the Learner                               | 228        |
| 6.2.1.1 What to Expect of and How to Support Learners                     | 229        |
| • Beliefs and Strategies: Vocabulary Learning and Effort for Achievement  | 230        |
| • Expectations: Significant People and Language Use                       | 232        |
| 6.2.1.2 What to Aim For and How to Guide Goal-setting                     | 235        |
| • Motivation, Ideal L2 Self and Imagined Community                        | 236        |
| 6.2.1.3 What/How to Teach and How/Where to Get Help                       | 239        |
| • Pedagogy, Resources and Strategies                                      | 239        |
| 6.2.2 Designing and Handling Tasks: An Example                            | 243        |
| <b>CONCLUSION</b>   | <b>246</b> |
| Disembarkation  | 246        |
| Landmarks   | 247        |
| Limitations   | 249        |
| Directions  | 252        |
| <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>   | <b>255</b> |
| <b>APPENDICES</b>   | <b>274</b> |
| A. Former PRC SM Students   | 274        |
| B. Poem: The Pipa Player  | 280        |
| C. Examples of Coding of Data   | 282        |
| D. TC's Autobiography   | 284        |
| E. The Bridging Course  | 286        |

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

CCA – Co-curricular Activities  
CELC – Centre for English Language Communication  
CELE – Centre for English Language Education  
CET4/6 – College English Test Band 4/6  
EAP – English for Academic Purposes  
EFL – English as a Foreign Language  
EIL – English as an International Language  
ELT – English Language Teaching  
ESL – English as a Second Language  
FY – Foundation Year  
FYP – Final Year Project  
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  
PRC – People’s Republic of China  
RQ – Research questions  
SEP – Student Exchange Programme  
SM2 – Senior Middle 2  
SM3 – Senior Middle 3  
TCCL – The Traditional Chinese Culture of Learning  
UDP – Undergraduate Degree Programme  
UNNC – University of Nottingham Ningbo China  
UoN – University of Nottingham

## LIST OF FIGURES

| <b>Figure</b> | <b>Title</b>  | <b>Page</b> |
|---------------|---|-------------|
| 2.1           | Letter of Invitation for Diary Project with 9 Prompts       | 82-84       |
| 2.2           | Email Invitation for Face-to-face Interview with 10 Prompts | 85-87       |
| 2.3           | Email Invitation for Email Interview with 5 Prompts         | 89-91       |
| 2.4           | Coding of Transcript of QC's Face-to-face Interview         | 97          |
| 2.5           | Data Analysis Process                                       | 98          |
| 2.6           | An Excerpt of the Themes Table                              | 101         |
| 4.1           | Motivation: A Multi-faceted Perspective                     | 133         |
| 5.1           | The Affective Dimension: An Upward Trajectory               | 192         |
| 5.2           | Interconnection of Learner Characteristics and Transitions  | 209         |
| C.1           | Coding of Summary of SQ's Diary                             | 282         |
| C.2           | Coding of QU's Email Interview                              | 282         |
| C.3           | Coding of TC's Autobiography                                | 283         |

## LIST OF TABLES

| <b>Table</b> | <b>Title</b>   | <b>Page</b> |
|--------------|--|-------------|
| 2.1          | Characteristics of Qualitative Research                  | 62          |
| 2.2          | Focal Participants of Multiple-case Study                | 63          |
| 2.3          | A Note on Transcription Conventions (A Sample)           | 74          |
| 2.4          | Overview of Time Frame, Data Collection and Participants | 80          |
| 2.5          | Themes, Sub-themes and Data Samples                      | 103-105     |
| 5.1          | Feelings Cited by Seven Focal Participants               | 181         |
| E.1          | Summary of Course Schedule and Content                   | 288         |
| E.2          | Schedule for Week 4 of the 2006 SMC Course               | 289         |

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **A Snapshot of My PhD Journey**

- **Embarkation**

Facing a class of late adolescent learners, all newly arrived from the same country and presumably the same learning context, what should an ELT/EAP teacher know? What are the key common learner characteristics of this group and what transitions do they undergo in moving from an EFL to an ESL setting? How should the teacher leverage on these characteristics and transitions to support her students in their English learning journey?

The above questions were very real for me when I taught an Intensive English course to five batches of People's Republic of China (PRC) students at the National University of Singapore (NUS) between 1997 and 2004. I also came to appreciate the struggles and aspirations of these young people as learners of English who had to adapt quickly to a new learning context in a university in Singapore. They also had to raise their English proficiency during a twenty-three week intensive course before their matriculation into NUS, or Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in some cases, in order to cope with the demands of their academic work and day-to-day living. Together, the questions and the appreciation led to the germination of my PhD project.

It is necessary at this point to provide some background to these PRC students and my interaction with them. Since 1992, the Ministry of Education (MOE) of Singapore has offered undergraduate scholarships to PRC students to study at NUS and NTU. 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 a lecturer since 1997, through an Intensive English course 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 called the ‘O’ level, is taken annually by Singapore secondary school leavers. Essentially, the course has an ELT focus with EAP elements in the latter half of the programme. There are two different Intensive English courses, popularly known as bridging courses (hereafter BC in this thesis), for the PRC MOE 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. As a matter of fact, the Intensive English course for SM3 students ceased to be offered in 2012, twenty years after its inception, as the two governments deemed that the scheme had served its purpose. It is not known yet when the SM2 Course, which commenced after the SM3 Course, will be discontinued.

Altogether I taught the Intensive English course over a period of ten years, for both SM3 and SM2. For three consecutive years, 1997 to 1999, I met an SM3 class once a week when the course was in session. I also taught a weekly class for the SM2 course for two consecutive years in 2002 and 2003. I later taught the SM3 course again in 2005 and 2006. In my 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. However, over the duration of the course, I also noticed that some of these students gradually modified or abandoned some of their previous beliefs and strategies and adopted other methods.

In 2004, about the same time that I corresponded with Professor Rebecca Hughes, then Director of the Centre for English Language Education (CELE) of the University of Nottingham, United Kingdom, about the possibility of her supervising my postgraduate studies, the University established its China campus, the University of Nottingham Ningbo, China (UNNC). This was a first – an English medium campus of a British university on Chinese soil. As the UNNC enrolled its first Foundation Year (FY)

students, I saw certain similarities between these students and their NUS SM3 counterparts. Both were

- homogeneous PRC groups, of comparable age and educational background, both having undergone the Gaokao before joining NUS or UNNC
- undergoing an intensive or bridging English course in a semi-immersion setting at the beginning of their tertiary studies and transiting from being EFL to ESL learners
- making adjustments in a new environment, living away from home and having to learn to manage their studies as well as personal lives

There were, of course, also differences in the two situations:

- More English was used in Singapore and NUS than in China and UNNC
- There was greater similarity between Ningbo and the students' hometowns
- There were different admission criteria, and language learning experiences of the two groups

Given my interaction with PRC students in NUS and Professor Hughes' involvement with the CELE programme at UNNC, we decided that my proposed PhD project would study the PRC learners in these two ESL tertiary level settings. I then enrolled at the University of Nottingham, UK, with Professor Hughes as my supervisor and thus began my PhD project and my own learning journey.

- **The Original Research Design**

As far as Professor Hughes and I were aware, such a two-way comparison of PRC students had yet to be attempted. It was hoped that the results of this research project would contribute to knowledge with respect to helping Chinese learners in the transition from being EFL to ESL learners. This could be a huge transition for students going from learning English only in the classroom to using it beyond the classrooms in larger social settings, like the university and the local community. This knowledge would be especially helpful in the present era when increasing numbers of PRC students are seeking an

English medium tertiary education at home or abroad. For them to succeed in their majors, they need the appropriate language support. Teachers, curriculum designers and administrators would in turn require research findings that assist them in their roles to provide that language support to help the learners succeed.

From interacting with the NUS PRC SM2 and SM3 students, I formed certain notions which informed the following hypotheses:

- Chinese learners bring with them certain characteristics, due to their Chinese EFL background, to their new ESL learning context.
- Some of these characteristics change over the duration of their intensive language course or bridging course, in varying degrees. They are learners in transition with many layers of meaning: geographical, socio-cultural, institutional, academic, linguistic, personal, etc.
- These learners are moving from the traditional Chinese Culture of Learning (TCCL) as described by Cortazzi and Jin (1996) and Jin and Cortazzi, (1998) to a more western-based learning culture. (For other writings on TCCL, see Gu, 2003; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Hu, 2003; Rao & Fusheng, 2007; Wachob, 2004.)
- The new learning situation is a semi-immersion context where the students receive English medium instruction but can and do communicate in Chinese with fellow students, teachers and the local community.
- Their learning context has an influence on the students' learning experiences.
- The UNNC Foundation Year students undergo a similar transition in a parallel semi-immersion context despite some differences.
- Based on the findings from this project on the NUS SM3 and the UNNC Foundation Year learners, the two universities, NUS and UNNC, and the feeder PRC high schools can help future learners make the transitions from being EFL to ESL learners more successfully.

However, it is necessary to resist the temptation to think of THE Chinese learner as a standard entity. As pointed out by Hu (2003), there is a wide disparity in Chinese ELT

between the more developed and less developed regions of China, resulting in a whole spectrum of Chinese learners. And China is itself in transition, politically, economically, socially, which has huge implications for its education policies and practices. The Chinese learners in NUS and UNNC must be seen as two of the many groups or “varieties” of PRC learners, who have successfully gained entry to NUS and UNNC respectively.

The original research questions (RQs) as of July 2005 were then framed as follows:

1. How similar and how different are the NUS and UNNC students in their English learning experiences? How do their different contexts help and/or hinder their learning?
2. Do the PRC learners bring any unique dimension to their English learning process in terms of learner attributes, learner conceptualizations and learner actions (Larsen-Freeman, 2001)?
3. What are the pedagogical implications for teachers and course designers?

The original samples were drawn from the 2006 cohorts of SM3 students in NUS and the Foundation Year students in UNNC. Prior to that, a limited pilot study was carried out with a small group of 2005 NUS SM3 students and a few 2005 UNNC Foundation Year students.

With regard to the duration for data collection, I had planned to examine and compare the transitions of the PRC students during their first year in NUS and in UNNC. Thus, I chose instruments that could help capture the changes in their motivations, beliefs, strategies, emotions and other learner characteristics over a substantial period. A learner journal, or diary for short, was thought to be a suitable tool for longitudinal studies and I decided to adopt it as the first instrument of my project. In addition, to leverage on recurrent themes culled from the preliminary analysis of the diaries, individual, face-to-face interviews were to be conducted at the end of the participants’ first year in NUS or in UNNC. It was hoped that the latter instrument could also act as a piece of triangulation in



this study. In Methodology, I will elaborate on the strengths and weaknesses of the diary and the interview as instruments.

- **Significant Milestones**

My journey as a researcher did not turn out to be a linear one, however. Along the way, some unforeseen circumstances hindered my progress but ultimately these were turned into helpful means to further my journey. In this section, I will record the developments that contributed to the change in the design and direction of my research; in my mind, these events formed the significant milestones to my destination.

In 2007, after I had collected data via learner diaries and interviews, and had carried out a preliminary analysis as planned, I fell seriously ill. I had to apply for leave from my studies as well as to work on a part-time basis temporarily. Coincidentally, my sole supervisor at that time, Professor Hughes, was also taken ill in the same year. When I returned to full-time work and resumed my studies in 2008, there were adjustments to be made, including re-establishing the pace I could work on my research.

Another development occurred around 2009 through my reading and reflection. I was moving into a more qualitative frame of mind in thinking of the study which had good potential given the data collected earlier. I also realised more fully the privileged insider perspective I had and wanted to make my role as teacher-researcher an asset to the study. I found myself gravitating towards this approach as it would build on my strengths and interests as a teacher who had first-hand knowledge of these students over a decade. I had journeyed with each batch through their transition from high school in China, to university in Singapore. Thus, I decided to move towards a qualitative study, drawing the core data from those I collected from the NUS students while the data from UNNC students would form the support and/or contrast to their NUS counterparts’.

Meanwhile, due to the medical leave period from my PhD candidature, my project had extended beyond the initial time frame of studying the students in the first year of their joining the respective universities. By then, I had been assigned a second supervisor, Dr

Juliet Thondhlana. After due deliberation and consultation with my supervisors, I decided to expand the scope of the study to the learners' entire stay in their respective universities. This was an important development to the research plan as the duration covered was now four times what was originally planned, making the project a truly longitudinal one.

An "exit" email interview with the samples from both universities was then planned for this second stage of data collection. As both the NUS and UNNC students had recently completed their undergraduate degree programmes (UDP) and most had moved out of campus, it would be difficult to set up face-to-face interviews. Five questions were forwarded via email to all the students of the original samples who participated in the diary research, in order to get as many responses as possible.

This exit or summative interview would give "closure" to the process of data gathering and my study of the students' learning journey through NUS. I had probed the students' transitions earlier in their academic lives (through diaries and face-to-face interviews) and attempted now to gain more detailed and possibly richer insights with probably smaller numbers through the exit email interviews. I had also planned that the study would eventually culminate in a "snapshot" of one or two students' reflections on their English learning journeys. This longitudinal perspective, wide to narrow, more generic to detailed, and group to individual would, I believed, be a defining characteristic of the thesis and give it much of its depth and originality.

However, I had to make another transition 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 diarists were adjusting to new schedules and lifestyles after 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. 121-2) 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. Though constituting a very small sample, her case studies provided a very meaningful representation of migrant, women learners of English in Canadian society. The issues surrounding case studies in qualitative research will be discussed further in Chapter 3: Methodology.

There was one more step to the data collection: in order 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 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" decision and invited him to write the account. He accepted the invitation and emailed the narrative within a few days. During the BC, this student was mostly quiet and diligent but did not stand out. However, from his email messages following the exit interview, I saw that he had made significant progress and expressed himself much better in writing than before.

I started this section by noting the non-linear nature of my study to document the learning journeys of the PRC learners. I went on to describe how my original plan was modified to work around unforeseen developments. In fact, at one point in 2007, having to balance work, studies, family and also health proved almost too daunting. However, the encouragement I received that this was a worthwhile project helped me to persevere. Then, the challenges of attrition and the limitations of the eventual small sample presented themselves. Happily, being able to envision the potential of building the project as a longitudinal multiple-case study has led to a more concentrated focus and a clearer portrait of the PRC learners. The unexpected turn of events has ultimately worked to the advantage of my inquiry.

- **Research Questions**

Having negotiated the issues of health problems, attrition, change in focus and research design, all part of the complexities of real world, qualitative research, I turned to the task of refining the research questions in order to gain the most from the data that the seven NUS students had provided. The change would offer an opportunity to maximise the research questions to reflect the heart of the project: a study of PRC learners in terms of their learner characteristics as well as the transitions they make in the course of their sojourn in NUS. Moreover, how would the insights from my study inform my pedagogy so that I can better help these learners transit from an EFL to an ESL context? In essence, I was asking the same questions I had asked with each new BC, the questions I recorded at the beginning of this Introduction.

Thus, to capture the objectives of my quest, the research questions (RQs) of the present study were reworked as follows:

**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?**

By “transitions” in RQ1, I refer to the changes in competence and confidence that the students experienced in their English learning, as well as those in their learner attributes, learner conceptualisations and learner actions as described by Larsen-Freeman (2001). In particular, I focused on five of the latter: beliefs; strategies; motivation; affective dimension; and identity, agency and investment. The choice of these categories was based on my teaching experience, past research and review of literature.

Before proceeding further, we may first reflect on the significance of studying the PRC learners’ characteristics and their transitions in a new learning context against the broader

concerns of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). According to Larsen-Freeman (2001), “the learner was not merely a passive recipient of customized native speaker input” (p. 12). Instead, the learner has important contributions to make which relate to their attributes (age, aptitude, personality, learning disabilities, social identities), conceptualizations (motivation, attitude, cognitive style, beliefs) and actions (learning strategies). Chamot (2001), writing on learning strategies, also calls for more descriptive research on students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds as “additional information is needed about the actual relationship between learning strategies and cultural beliefs and values” (p. 42). The contexts in which the learners are situated, including information on language learning strategy training and extra-curricular activities are also important areas for investigation as pointed out by Breen: “...variation will also have to be explained with reference to the context in which the learning occurred so that the input, process, and outcomes are seen as extensions of how the learners variously defined that context and acted in it” (1996, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p. 24). There is apparently a place for “more holistic” research (p. 24) on both learner contributions and contextual influence in SLA.

This present project, in its efforts to study the Chinese learners’ characteristics, including their motivations, beliefs, strategies, affective dimension and identities, and their transitions in a new L2 learning context, would be a worthwhile one. It seeks to examine the “Chinese learner characteristics” that have been described by researchers in this field and compare them to the findings based on the participants in the current study. Such an investigation may serve to confirm the conclusions of the earlier studies or shed new light on “the Chinese learner” and “the Chinese culture of learning”.

### **A Decade of Journeying with PRC Learners**

At the very beginning of my narrative, I looked back on my appreciation of the PRC students as learners of English. This growing interest helped towards my decision to make these learners the subject of my PhD research. From 1997 to 2006 (inclusive), I taught seven groups of PRC students: five SM3 and two SM2. It was indeed a decade of

journeying with these students, not only when each BC was in session, but for long afterwards. The rapport built over nearly six months with each group led to first, a good teacher-student relationship, and later to warm friendships. Up to the time of this writing, some students from each batch have kept in touch through cards as well as telephone, email, text and/or Facebook messages. Some have dropped in at my office. In fact, the latest “reunion” I had with my former PRC students was lunch with XJ who returned to Singapore on a four-month internship with a French multi-national company for her MBA programme at HEC, Paris (see Appendix A: Former PRC Students).

What is significant about the close relationship I have enjoyed with these PRC students for my PhD project? I suggest the following. First of all, it underscores my long standing, first-hand, privileged insider knowledge of these learners as a teacher and researcher over a decade. Secondly, the students’ trust in me as their teacher allowed the participants in my studies to be open and candid in their diary entries and interview responses. Thirdly, having seen the successful journeys of the forerunners from the earlier batches, I aspire to tell their story through my current study and to help future batches to succeed in their transitions.

To give the reader some insights into the learning journeys of the succeeding batches of SM3 and SM2 students I have taught, in 2010 I invited some of the pre-2006 batches to write a short piece. Six of them responded either through email or Facebook messages. I requested that they recall some highlights about the changes/transitions in their English learning from the time they came to Singapore, during their BC and up till their UDP. I also expressed interest in knowing what they were doing with English in their professional life and what they saw as the place/role of English in their future. These six narratives are in Appendix A for the reader’s reference.

During this decade of journeying with the PRC students, I had the opportunity to investigate various aspects of their English learning. Cumulatively, these investigations built up my knowledge of the Chinese students’ learner characteristics and the transitions they experienced, and eventually led me to undertake the current research project. In the

rest of this section, I will describe some of my previous research and how they have contributed to the present study.

My first effort to study and to help these young learners was to encourage them to be more conscious about their own learning. In a joint study, a CELC colleague and I experimented with the learner diary as an instrument to raise the metacognitive awareness of our two groups of 1998 SM3 students (about 40 in total). It was found that indeed the diary was 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 diary entries provided insights on how the students evaluated their strengths and weaknesses, made plans for further learning, chose strategies, and negotiated task demands. This study was presented in 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 SM3 students (presented at AILA 2002) confirmed the previous study's findings. From these two early studies, I learnt the usefulness of the diary as an instrument for longitudinal inquiry and for raising students' consciousness towards their own learning.

To obtain a general profile of the SM3 students' attitudes and actions in managing their learning, I conducted a questionnaire survey on 151 students enrolled in the 2005 batch. The analysis of the results indicated that, after being in the course for nearly five months, the students were generally confident about learning English well and about speaking English in public. They believed in effort for achievement and self-monitoring for improvement. They were also inclined towards self-directed, independent learning, especially with experimentation in out-of-class situations. 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 of being actively involved in the evaluation and direction of their formal in-class learning, such as its objectives, activities, pace and assessments. With regards to strategies for language learning, I inferred that these students preferred the use of social and affective learning strategies.

Overall, the study points to the need for pedagogical intervention to help PRC ESL 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), added to my understanding of the PRC learners’ attitudes and actions along their learning and contributed to my reflections on their learner characteristics and transitions.

Following the quantitative study on the whole 2005 batch mentioned above, 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 SM3 students I taught for that session 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, was carried out with reference to the learners’ motivation, beliefs, attitudes, strategies and affective factors. The data indicated that the students’ motivation was mainly instrumental and they had certain clear beliefs about language learning. They also evaluated their progress and some language learning strategy use was mentioned though few of the students reported using strategies deliberately. It was apparent that the learners would benefit from more strategy training. Affective factors were shown to have a strong impact on the students’ experience, with a range of positive and negative emotions associated with learning English. Two other factors that repeatedly surfaced were the importance of social support and the emphasis on effort. The students stressed their bonding with their group members, being far away from family and friends. They also reiterated the importance of effort on their part to succeed in their learning. Generally, the students of this group 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 culture of learning. The methodology, skills and personality of the teacher all had an impact on the learning outcomes of these students.



The above study yielded interesting and useful insights for me as a teacher to the PRC learners. For interested readers, a journal article based on this study, “‘Don’t worry a lot, dear!’: Reflections of PRC ESL learners on their English language learning experience”, can be found in *Reflections on English Language Teaching*, 5(2), (Fong, 2006b). Very importantly for me as a researcher, this qualitative study prefigured the learner characteristics and transitions I should focus on in my PhD 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 later to reflect on using interviews for triangulation. In fact, for the instruments of my current study, I did use the diary and the interview (face-to-face as well as the email). I also used an autobiography. My rationale for using these instruments will be described more fully in Methodology.

Between 2005 and 2006, as part of my original research plan, I visited the University of Nottingham campus at Ningbo, China (UNNC) three times to get acquainted with the Foundation Year (FY) students and to collect data from them. The first visit saw a tentative, pilot effort to conduct an informal interview with a small number of 2005 FY students in order to get a general feel of their English learning experience. I then compared the data obtained from these students with those from the summative diary study of their NUS 2005 SM3 counterparts. Both the diary and the interview were carried out using the same set of ten prompts. The findings show 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 the teacher towards

greater independence for their own learning. Language learning strategies were mentioned by both samples though few of the NUS students mentioned deliberate use. Both groups expressed a variety of feelings 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 at The Second CELC Symposium, The English Language Teaching and Learning Landscape: Continuity, Innovation and Diversity (Fong, 2007). For this very limited comparison, it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions on the similarities and differences between the NUS and UNNC students; moreover, this early experiment was, as mentioned, intended as a guide for future data collection.

The actual data collection for the PhD research project took place as planned in 2006. The diary and face-to-face interviews were carried out in both NUS and UNNC. Together, they are referred to as Stage 1 of data collection for the current research project (see Table 2.4 in Methodology). The original research questions (as of July 2005) aimed to compare the learning experiences of these two groups of PRC learners as a result of undergoing their respective BC at NUS and UNNC. It was also hoped that pedagogical implications could be drawn from the findings. A preliminary analysis of the learner diaries and interviews suggested that there were certain 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 two learning/teaching contexts exerted a degree of influence on the transitions. The findings were presented as a conference paper, “Learners in Transition: Chinese students enrolled in English language bridging courses” at Shantou University, China, in 2010.

In summary, through the above investigations of what initially seemed to be intuition and later supported by my teaching experience, it became increasingly apparent to me that I should focus on certain learner characteristics for my PhD project. Moreover, as I grew in my familiarity with the literature on Chinese students (see Literature Review), I received greater affirmation that I was on the right path. Thus, there were certain a priori

categories or themes that I wove into the prompts of the diaries and interviews for my inquiry. These were motivation, beliefs, strategies, affective factors, identity, culture and context. However, I was open to the possibility of other themes surfacing from the data analysis. In addition, the above studies and gleanings from literature on methodology also confirmed for me the instruments I would use. Finally, looking back on all these studies, I realised that I had favoured the qualitative approach which was also the path I eventually chose for my current research. It was apt that my decade of journeying with Chinese learners had prepared me for undertaking this study.

### **My Own Journey as Learner, Teacher and Researcher**

For this closing section of Introduction, I reflected that it would be fitting to travel further back in time to my own journey as an English learner, teacher and researcher. With hindsight, I believe that this first journey's struggles and transitions were the genesis of my PhD journey. Without my own L2 learning experiences, I would probably not have arrived at the point where I would undertake this project to study my Chinese students. However, I am not so much writing about myself as accounting for some possible reasons I "connect" with the PRC learners. This account will, I believe, lend greater credibility to my insider perspective of this group of learners. As argued by Vandrick, though we expect academics to "preserve the myths of objectivity and the impartiality of scholarship" (Hesford, 1997 as cited in Vandrick, 2002, p. 412) writing autobiographically may offer another route for them to create knowledge. A teacher's family or individual history can impact his or her teaching.

It is necessary to begin with my family's migration from China to Singapore for, without that move, my life would have been totally different. My grandparents on both sides of the family, newly married, arrived in Singapore around 1925 from the same region of Taishan, China. From the stories told by my paternal grandmother, great aunts, and parents, I pieced together a picture of my forebears. They were like the SM3 students in one way: they came to Singapore in the hope of making a better life for themselves and their families. However, unlike the SM3 scholars, they did not come with the cultural

capital of a good high school education. In fact, hailing from peasant communities, they had very little formal education, if at all, and going to university was clearly an unthought-of luxury. My maternal grandfather apprenticed as a tailor after arriving in Singapore and eventually started his own business, considered a notable achievement for a migrant, and managed to pass it on to his oldest surviving son. On the other hand, my paternal grandfather, according to my late father's memoirs, started out as a tailor but became a tinker of sorts, repairing irons for tailors till the Japanese Occupation of World War II cut short his life. Both sets of grandparents had large families, though only a relatively few survived to adulthood: my father grew up with three siblings and my mother five. In summary, I was myself descended from Chinese migrants who transited to life in Singapore which they eventually called home.

Despite their poverty, my grandparents tried to provide for their sons' education. In that colonial era, my father and uncles enrolled in schools set up by foreign missionary societies or Chinese clan associations. Somehow, my father managed to attend both English and Chinese schools in one day. There was no spare money to educate daughters, however. They would be married soon enough to raise families anyway and what good would formal schooling be to them? That was the prevailing attitude among the working "class". Thus, my mother never went to school but taught herself to read and write Chinese by reading her brothers' school books, the newspapers and anything else available. Her younger sister was privileged enough to attend night school in late adolescence. However, both my parents valued education and literacy highly and that had made all the difference for me and my siblings. They ensured that their six children received all the education they could get. Thus, when the data of my study surfaced the significant role of the focal participants' parents in their English learning journey, I was not surprised.

My father's influence over how I developed intellectually and linguistically was immense. He wrote in his memoirs (in English) that he had at most four years of schooling. It was disrupted by World War II when the Japanese army occupied Singapore from 1942 to 1945 after the British forces surrendered the colony. After Japan's

surrender, he tried to continue his education but had to leave school again to help support the family as the eldest son since his father had died in the war. Yet, my father never gave up learning. As a pre-school child, I often saw him reading both Chinese and English books and newspapers. He even bought the Life magazine (which was glossy and presumably expensive) and I remember poring over the photographs of the Vietnam War, the Beatles and world dignitaries, even when I could not read the English text. When my two younger sisters and I were in primary school, my father would take us on many Saturdays to the National Library in town on his way to work and “collect” us after work in the afternoon. We thus developed the habit of and the love for reading, especially for me. And because my father was bilingual in English and Mandarin (besides speaking a number of Chinese “dialects”, actually languages linguistically speaking; Malay and some Japanese), it seemed only natural to me that I should pick up and read books and magazines in English and in Chinese. In addition, he made it clear that he expected his children to do well academically. He demanded to see our completed homework, read with us, and prescribed extra assignments and coached us when necessary. He believed in effort, his and ours, much like what my PRC students reflected in the data. I did not think of all this effort as special until one day in primary school when my Chinese teacher asked me questions to learn what my parents did to help me excel in the language. I was struck that she expressed some admiration for my father’s efforts.

My mother, on the other hand, was instrumental in laying the foundation for my career as an English teacher. When the time came to decide which “stream” of primary school I was to be enrolled in, my mother argued the case for an English medium school. My father had a somewhat sentimental zeal for his ancestral homeland and preferred the Chinese “stream”. Pragmatism prevailed in the end. I often marvel at my mother’s foresight to discern which language would provide me with greater future opportunities. English has indeed become increasingly important in Singapore and in the world with far reaching implications. One of these is the growing influx of international students seeking an English medium education in Singapore, including those from China. Thus, her vision of an imaginary community for me helped set in motion the journey I have taken to this very place: a teacher of English carrying out research on a group of PRC learners.

My parents definitely gave me (and my siblings) a head start to life through formal education and informal inculcation of values. How did these advantages help my English learning? Initially, my language situation did not look promising. I loved reading in both Chinese and English but speaking was another matter. My family spoke mainly the Singapore variety of Cantonese at home because my paternal grandmother had always lived with us. She could only speak the Taishan dialect of Cantonese, which I could follow but could not speak fluently. The language situation was very similar when we visited my mother's extended family. The language of the playground, on the other hand, was Hokkien (originating from the province of Fujian, with its own dialects), the language of the largest Chinese group in Singapore; I had to pick up a working knowledge or risk having no playmates. Two new languages, English and Mandarin, became more familiar to me after television was introduced to Singapore in 1963. Mandarin became fairly comfortable as we watched more of such television programmes than English ones. My parents took us occasionally to Mandarin movies, and only rarely to English ones. People in our family's social circle spoke more Cantonese and Mandarin than English though my father used English with his German supervisor at work as well as with some colleagues and friends. Thus, I was in effect an L2 learner of English, as well as of Mandarin, with a surer footing in the latter.

My language situation changed slightly when I entered kindergarten and then an English medium primary school. In these new contexts, I had to learn English in earnest as all subjects except Second Language (Mandarin in my case) were taught in English. However, I spoke little English till midway through primary school. I was by nature shy and probably fearful of making mistakes so I hardly spoke in English outside of what was required in school. This early experience could be the root of my empathy with the PRC learners who were too shy to speak English initially. Thus, in a curious configuration of language development, English was officially my first school language but it was really my L2 (together with Mandarin learnt at the same time) after Cantonese. It was only after I had understood and "acquired" more English and grew in confidence that I started to speak it more often. On hindsight, I had a similar English as L2 learning experience as

some of my PRC students who went through a “silent period” at the beginning of the BC. After that critical transition, probably in Primary Four, my English learning accelerated. I also began to perform better overall and was among the top students for the final examination of my cohort that year. As for writing, I feel that my constant reading contributed to my generally above average English compositions. The grammar and vocabulary seemed to come naturally to me. For ideas and content, there was cross-fertilisation with Chinese as I recall mentally translating terms and names. For my proficiency in Chinese, I represented my school in an essay competition. As for English, though it still trailed Chinese, by the time I sat the Primary Six Leaving Examination, I had no worries about passing the papers set in English. However, overall, English was still L2 to me in terms of competence and confidence.

The transition to secondary school and later to pre-university education saw my English catch up with Chinese slowly but steadily over the six years. When I meet classmates from that era later in our lives, they always recall that I was one of the rare bilingual students of our schooldays. Some of my essays written for our Chinese and English language classes were either read out to my classmates by the teachers or pinned on the class noticeboard. At different times, I was selected as a representative for the inter-class English debate and story-telling competition. In terms of examination results, I was among the top students for Chinese. A new element was the introduction to literature, in both English Literature and Chinese Language classes. I was enthralled by the beauty and richness of both languages; literature became my first love. By the time I sat for the Singapore-Cambridge G.C.E ‘O’ Level Examination, my English was almost on par with my Chinese. However, the balance was tipped during pre-university classes. By this stage in my English stream education, Chinese was given less time in the curriculum with only one optional class per week. I opted for it and tried to keep up with my proficiency. Looking back, I see motivation, agency and investment in that action. Yet, in the ‘A’ Level Examination, I did not do as well in Chinese language as I did for the English General Paper, a reversal of my ‘O’ Level results. Over time, my two school languages neared a state of equilibrium, when I had started with a much stronger grasp of and affinity for Chinese. I was also becoming increasingly comfortable and competent with

English. It had become more than an L2 though not yet the de facto language of choice in my communication and interaction with others. The learning context of a heavily English curriculum definitely had an impact on my English proficiency.

Besides following the school curricula, what other factors could have accounted for the growth of my English proficiency between Primary One and Pre-university Two? Several salient factors in the early part of my English learning journey stand out in my mind. However, both my school languages seemed to have developed as twin tracks so I must describe them as interwoven in the paragraphs below.

The first factor that could have contributed to my growth as a language learner was the encouragement of my teachers and my warm relationships with them. Looking at Chinese first, I had the same Chinese teacher, Mrs T, for all my primary school years and the unbroken teacher-student relationship and tutelage was probably very important for my firm foundation in Chinese. In secondary school, Mr H often cited lines from Chinese poetry and excerpts from short stories during his Chinese Language class. Parallel to this mentorship and rich language input for Chinese was the positive language learning experiences under several English language teachers who also had considerable impact on my growing motivation and proficiency in English. In Primary Four, Miss G was kind and gentle and made learning pleasant in her class. Miss C, in Primary Five, was well-read, brilliant, temperamental but often funny. I always waited for her class to hear the “story of the day”, and was thus initiated into the world of the classics. In secondary school, Miss T recommended that I be entered as one of the class representatives for the English debate and the English story-telling competition. She and other teachers either read out my essays (along with my classmates’) during class or asked me to copy them for the class noticeboard; these forms of recognition fueled my motivation to do even better. Moreover, I almost always enjoyed a good student-teacher relationship with these teachers, and somehow felt that they looked upon me favourably even though I was a quiet student. Thus, I discern a parallel here with my PRC students. We are to see that they were motivated by teachers’ praise and encouragement.



The second factor was the class library in both my primary and secondary schools which was usually just a modest cupboard with shelves of books in English (as mine were English medium schools). Students could browse through the books (when the teacher was away for some reason) or borrow them for reading at home. What was important was that, from my upper primary school years onwards, I could often be found at the class library. The subject of learning strategies was never mentioned in those days but students were always encouraged to read. Hence, by inclination and with encouragement, I read avidly. It was thus, I believe, that the language gradually imprinted itself on the malleable clay of my young mind. Again, I can compare this to some PRC learners who said that they read voraciously to the point that they would naturally think in English.

The third factor was family related. On the one hand, there was always, even if only in the background, my parents' expectation that their children worked hard and excelled academically. As "good" children in a traditional, ethnic Chinese (that is, Confucian heritage) family, there was no question about disappointing our parents, especially when they had themselves set the example of effort and modest achievement. It was simply an obligation to be fulfilled. On the other, my mother's childbearing configuration of five daughters and only one son also made me determined to do well academically as a matter of honour. During my childhood and adolescence, when the traditional preference for sons was still very strong, my mother's succession of four daughters, before producing a son, was considered undesirable and the subject of "unpleasantry" among my father's extended family. Subconsciously, as I grew up, I must have tried to prove that girls were as good as boys; and perhaps one possible arena was academic performance. I tried to outperform all my boy cousins especially those from the family who were loudest in their taunts. Personally, I also received some ridicule for being unable to speak English fluently in my lower primary school days. Thus, it gave me immense satisfaction to catch up with them in my English. It appears that the affective dimension due to my family background also contributed to my growing English proficiency. Intuitively, I included this factor in my studies of the PRC learners from the earliest efforts.

Did the equilibrium between English and Chinese change after I proceeded to tertiary education at the University of Singapore (a predecessor of the National University of Singapore)? Prior to my admission, I had weighed my interests and possible career openings, including the teaching service, to decide on my choice of majors. I realised that, as an English medium school student, I was not qualified to pursue an undergraduate degree programme (UDP) in Chinese language and literature. Instead, it was more sensible to take up English language and literature, especially when the language would open more doors as it was in ascendancy both nationally and internationally. That decision meant that I was in contact with English much more than with Chinese though I strived to keep my ideal bilingual self-identity alive by taking two Chinese Studies minor courses during my UDP. The English literature and linguistics courses that formed my major not only demanded more frequent use of English but also more abstract apprehension and manipulation of the language. Besides the lecture theatre and tutorial class, I almost always used English in interaction with coursemates and friends. At home too, I realised that there was a fair amount of code-switching between Cantonese and English, and code-mixing as well, among my father, my siblings and myself, depending on the topic of conversation. For example, we used mainly Cantonese in talking about family life and perhaps mainly English about school life, the world or the news. I cannot remember when I started to think in English but I probably thought in English most of the time during this period when I operated so much academically and socially in the language. Thus, imperceptibly, English had become the dominant language in my life; finally, my first language in school had become my first language. The equilibrium had tipped; an important transition had taken place.

This dominance in English continued into the subsequent phases of my professional, academic and inner life: teacher-in-training, secondary school English language and literature teacher, postgraduate student, English language lecturer and researcher. It was during my initial working life that I began to jot down poems that grew out of particularly poignant moments. This development signals to me, in retrospect, that I not only thought but also “felt” in English. As an example of my affective expressions in English, I include in Appendix B a poem written about 1987 or 1988 which recorded the ambivalence and

tension I felt about the two languages and cultures in my life. This transition from reading to writing poetry in English marked another milestone in my own learning journey: English was not just the language of my mind but the language of my heart as well. Therefore, when I came across Hoffman's (1989) chronicle of her English learning journey, I could identify with her experience: "When I talk to myself now, I talk in English. English is the language in which I've become an adult...when I am alone...the internal dialogue proceeds in English" (p. 272).

Since then, I have gradually come to terms with the accumulative attrition in my Chinese along with the growing competence in my English. This was yet another transition: the acceptance of some language loss in Chinese. I can still listen, speak and read it with relative ease. There are opportunities enough for that in Singapore and when I travel in China. However, writing has been more difficult for many years because I hardly ever need to write in the language. In 1989-1990, while studying at Edinburgh University, my letters home to my mother were composed with an English-Chinese dictionary in hand. I felt pathetic then. However, I have slowly recognised the inevitability of the direction that my life has taken, and I am not without hope that I can relearn Chinese in my retirement. I found in one focal participant's data a similar allusion to the theme of language loss though that was a minor theme for her.

It will be impossible to mention all the transitions in my journey from learning English as a second language to using it as a first language but I will highlight one more. During the twelve months I lived in the United Kingdom while pursuing an MSc in Applied Linguistics, I believe my exposure to the variety of "Englishes" was expanded. I learnt to interact with people academically and socially despite initial difficulty with different accents. My class comprised over forty students from many countries. Among the British students were the Scottish, Welsh and English. Many coursemates also came from continental Europe: Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Finland, Czechoslovakia. The next biggest group was from Africa, comprising Kenyans, Nigerians and one Burundian. From Asia, there were representatives from Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and Kuwait. Finally, there was one American. My MSc class also interacted

with the PhD candidates, among whom were Tunisian, Malaysian, Hong Kong and PRC students. As for our teachers, besides the mostly British staff, there were an Italian and an American. Outside of the university, I met friends who were Scottish, Dutch, Brazilian, Peruvian and Indian. This rich learning context helped me to develop empathy with the repertoire of the Englishes I contacted with. This was a significant transition, affectively speaking. Little did I know then that this enriching experience and learnt openness would prepare me for the varieties of English that the PRC students brought to our SM2/3 class due to their past L2 experiences and perhaps also their regional and social backgrounds.

Another angle for looking at my English learning journey is the development from being a more traditional to a less traditional learner. Before I embarked on my PhD studies, I had not come across the notion of the traditional Chinese culture of learning (TCCL). With hindsight now, my early experience of and approach to learning English (and Chinese too) reflected many aspects of TCCL outlined in the literature (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998): transmission and imitation models of learning, teacher as authority and model, emphasis on mastery of knowledge and learning from texts, memorisation of vocabulary and grammar, and strong belief in effort for achievement. However, I was not schooled in large classes by PRC standards; thus, I did not lack exposure and practice. Neither do I consider myself to be passive and lacking in autonomy, nor was I particularly exam-driven. Strictly speaking, my father was my earliest teacher and role model. One of my earliest memories was of my father telling me the story of Little Red Riding Hood at bedtime. He also read to me and my sisters from children's books and magazines while I imitated his reading habit by browsing through the newspapers, magazines and books found around our home, trying to make sense of the text and pictures. He also brought us to the National Library in town. So I had early experiences with the transmission and imitation models of learning, with emphasis on learning from texts. During our early primary school days, my father also required his children to present two handwritten pages to him every school vacation day: one page each of English and Chinese. There were several purposes: to master and memorise the writing of a Chinese/English word/phrase, to practise our handwriting and to keep us working hard! Explicitly and implicitly, my father impressed on us his belief that effort was necessary for achievement.

Thus, like my PRC learners, I was socialised early into what I now recognise as TCCL. At school too, I was taught by teachers with the same approach: transmission, imitation, mastery of texts and knowledge, memorisation of vocabulary and grammar (I well remember the spelling drills and other tests). As the other significant adults in my life, the teachers exhorted my classmates and me to work hard for our future and not to disappoint our parents, which I now understand as an appeal to our “Ought-to Self” (Dörnyei, 2010). Some teachers were more authoritarian than others but I conformed anyway, as any “good student” would do.

However, I was not always consistent. In secondary school and pre-university days, sometimes, my love for reading would overtake my felt obligation to prepare better for exams. I also felt I learnt best what I was interested in and gave priority to some components over others, for example, composition over vocabulary or spelling tests. This exercise of choice probably pointed to a growing desire for more autonomy. The relatively smaller classes than those in China (around forty), also allowed more individual attention from teachers and interaction among classmates. Whenever possible, I tried to take advantage of opportunities these presented: I asked questions of teachers to clarify my doubts and read my classmates’ essays to learn their writing techniques. I was becoming a more independent learner. From university onwards, I made transitions to even greater autonomy, as tertiary education was in essence a time to nurture intellectual and academic freedom. Among other things, I explored strategies other than memorisation for building my vocabulary and adjusted my beliefs about effort for achievement. For instance, I used association and mnemonic devices and I realised the importance of a broad and deep grasp of a subject. Thus, in a parallel fashion to the focal participants, I left behind some elements of TCCL while acquiring new ones in my journey.

When I set out to help my PRC learners and embarked on this PhD project, I sought to tell the story of this group of learners with their unique characteristics. Little did I know that in tracing their learning journey and transitions, I was to discover my own parallel journey and transitions. My project has thus brought together my interests in applied

linguistics, my unique relationship with my PRC students, and my experience as an ESL learner, teacher and researcher. Personally, I am grateful for this learning experience. Professionally, I hope it will also contribute to the endeavours of my colleagues teaching and researching this group of learners in other contexts.

This may be a convenient point to disembark from the narration of my own English learning journey. As I reflect on the process through which I became an English teacher and researcher, I see both convergence and divergence between my own learning journey and that of my PRC students. Despite our different starting ages, national origins, and social backgrounds, we may have certain similarities in our beliefs, motivation, strategies, affective domain, identities, mediated through our cultures and influenced by our L1 and L2 contexts. However, I must also beware the danger of mapping my own English learning experience on to that of the participants in this study. I may draw on insights from my insider perspective but never force it on the analysis and interpretation of the data. The participants must be allowed to tell the stories of their own English learning journeys.

In the chapters following this Introduction, I hope to present the stories of the seven focal participants' English learning journeys after the review of literature in Chapter 1 and a discussion on methodology in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 will describe the macro sociocultural and academic contexts of the learners in China and in Singapore while Chapters 4 and 5 will examine the findings on their micro learner characteristics: motivation, beliefs, strategies, affect and identity. In Chapter 6, we will discuss the pedagogical implications of the study before concluding the thesis with an eye on future directions for research on PRC learners.

## **Chapter 1: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

What have researchers and teachers reported about PRC learners or Chinese learners from similar cultural contexts? What learner characteristics and transitions have been documented in the literature? In order to aptly situate the current study of PRC Chinese learners in their transition from high school in China to university in NUS, a university in Singapore, it is necessary to review the literature on Chinese learners. Moreover, as these learners were pursuing an English medium education abroad, it is also appropriate to survey research on Chinese students' learning experiences in study-abroad contexts. In this chapter, we will review research findings on Chinese, particularly PRC, students as well as literature on study-abroad contexts involving these learners.

### **1.1 “The Chinese Learner” and “the Chinese Culture of Learning”**

The two interrelated notions of the Chinese learner and the Chinese culture of learning 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 seek to debunk these concepts. To complicate the picture, there are also publications that say, yes, these two entities exist but they are changing along with China's rapid 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 “culture of learning” was used by Cortazzi and Jin (1996) to refer to a set of expectations, attitudes, beliefs, values, perceptions, preferences, and behaviours that are considered characteristic of society, in this case Chinese society, with regard to teaching and learning. It is part of a hidden curriculum that encompasses the broader issues of the nature and purpose of education. Children are socialised early into this culture of learning and the influence continues into the 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. 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 B.C.) lived during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770-221 B.C.), 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 traditional Chinese culture of learning 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 traditional Chinese culture of learning 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) hastened to add 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 Chinese culture of learning 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). In a later study, Rao (2005) further emphasised 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. Secondly, 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 (Rao, 2005, p. 54).

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 the realm of the 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 hard 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). Secondly, 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 emphasizing 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).

Even in more recent years, some scholars researching the field of Chinese learners still concur with the earlier literature mentioned above about the Chinese learner and the traditional Chinese culture of learning. Li's (2007) study on a graduate student's socialisation into writing research articles reported that he prepared for his College English Test Band 4 (CET4) by "memorizing vocabulary and doing practice tests", practices associated with the traditional Chinese culture of learning. To prepare for CET6, he 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 that is attributed to the Chinese culture of learning. Gu (2010a), researching the national identity change among Chinese undergraduates as a result of EFL learning, mentions that the "Confucian tradition, especially its educational ideals, is deeply ingrained in Chinese culture" (p. 57). Thus, we may infer that, generally, the Chinese culture of learning described above still wielded considerable influence about the same time that the focal participants were completing high school in China (2006).

In summary, the above research findings in the literature seem to agree on the whole about an almost homogeneous Chinese culture of learning. However, since the publication of Cortazzi and Jin's 1996 study, there have been dissenting voices regarding the notion surrounding a traditional Chinese culture of learning. Many of these are skeptical 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. Other studies have challenged the idea of the Chinese learner as a single, homogeneous identity, suggesting instead a complex and fluid phenomenon of hybrid or multiple identities according to the specific contexts that learners are situated in. Indeed, many of these alternative views find resonance with my decade-long experience of teaching and researching PRC learners.

### **1.1.2. Dissent**

One of the dissenting voices is Biggs (1996), which though employing the term Confucian Heritage Cultures or (CHC) instead of the traditional Chinese culture of learning, 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). For one thing, 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 of 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 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 staff 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 by Western teachers in the literature.

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 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 draws on teaching experience and observations 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 concluded that this is based on limited observation and small data sets. 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 Chinese culture of learning, Gu (2003) compares two “successful” tertiary Chinese university learners who scored above 90% in the CET4. From the findings of this case study which focused 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. Secondly, repetition and memorisation are an integral part of meaningful learning. Thirdly, 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. Fourthly, 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 strategies 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) finding in the above study, 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 me. 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. ...there 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 & 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 focal participant "appeared to be intrinsically interested in English while seeing its instrumental importance" (p. 94). Thus, he 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 this study's participants is likely to be complex and multi-faceted and could be examined from various angles, such as extrinsic versus intrinsic, instrumental versus integrative.

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 Chinese culture of learning (which Hu refers to as TCCL and which will be the acronym adopted in this study), 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 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 situation, 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 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, socio-cultural factors and, curricular and pedagogical practices. Due to the disparity in these factors, ELT in the MD regions have evolved further from 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 TCCL. 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 TCCL as compared to students from the LD.

Hu's 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 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 TCCL, some researchers actually 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 (1997) brought together the two themes of TCCL and learner identity in his paper, “The classroom and the wider culture: Identity as key to learning English composition”. 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 emphasizes 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 alluded to another article in the same volume, “From silence to words: Writing as struggle” by Lu (1997) 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 formalized, 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 are of interest to my study, and will be among the facets I will examine among the seven focal participants.

### **1.1.3 Winds of Change**

To complicate the picture further, some studies over the last decade suggest that TCCL and the Chinese learners may be dynamic, evolving entities. In a contrastive study on strategy use by “successful” and “unsuccessful” students, Gan, Humphreys & 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 by 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 strategy use and goal-setting indicate that Chinese learners are not passive learners as characterised in 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, pp. 310-311). 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 EFL learners' use of strategies.

Yet another recent 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 is 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 previous studies on the Chinese culture of learning. Being knowledgeable remains the most important measure for good teachers while perseverance and diligence are overwhelmingly those of good students. Exams remain a prime concern and an important yardstick: good teachers should help students pass exams and students still find passing exams the most important reason for studying English. Thus, characteristics attributed to TCCL and those not usually associated with the culture 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 her respondents' culture of learning, Shi cautions 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 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, TCCL and "the Chinese learner" have been evolving too. A decade after their 1996 work, Jin and Cortazzi (2006) provided an update on their insights on TCCL and Chinese learners in an article aptly entitled, "Changing Practices in Chinese Learning Cultures". Based on their research of Chinese students in the UK, they maintain that the Chinese culture of learning still provides 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 highlight 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 TCCL's lack of distinction of the many Chinese groups.

One common strand that binds the Chinese together is literacy in the language which includes the learning of the Chinese script with several thousand characters. The mastery of the script, through demonstration, modeling, tracing, repeated copying, and active memorisation, are practices that contribute to the socialisation of children into Chinese cultures of learning with its characteristic beliefs, attitudes, expectations, and behaviours. Against this backdrop of the continuing traditional Chinese culture of learning influenced by Confucian heritages, according to Jin and Cortazzi (2006), there are changing practices [emphasis added] including those in ELT.

These changes are seen among students in China as well as those in study-abroad contexts. English as a subject is important in three ways: as a key curriculum subject, as the likely medium of learning for study abroad and, increasingly, as the medium of instruction for postgraduate courses in premier universities in China (p. 8). English also has gate keeping roles for educational, professional and social advancement. It is no wonder then that large numbers of learners display “high motivation, energetic enthusiasm and a coordinated effort for studying English” (p. 10). English has long been compulsory from middle school onwards, then introduced at the upper primary levels, and increasingly offered to the lower primary grades and even kindergarten. ELT Methodology and classroom roles continue to evolve though exams, such as the crucial College English Tests (CET) that continue to dominate and drive approaches to teaching and learning (p. 11). There are, however, conscious efforts at innovation, among them using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in national and key provincial universities and sending teachers of English to target countries for postgraduate programmes or language exposure (p. 8).

The central education authorities also encourage new emphases for changing practices in ELT. New national targets have been put in place to develop students cognitively, affectively, culturally and creatively, with the desired outcomes of greater student participation, critical thinking, collaborative learning, practical ability to use the language, cultural awareness and international vision (pp. 14-15). It is to be expected that these changes in Chinese ELT will impact the Chinese students who go abroad for undergraduate or postgraduate education.

In one of their latest works, the two researchers, emphasised the importance of teachers recognizing cultures of learning as such recognition “can be part of validating the students’ individualities, social identities, and cultural voices” (Cortazzi & Jin, 2013, p. 2). In turn, this can lead students to develop new ways of learning. Teachers benefit too, growing 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 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."

Up till recent times, however, the TCCL still exerts substantial influence on the current generation of students according to Wang (2013). The researcher conducted a questionnaire survey at a key university in Shandong Province, China among 691 students originating from 26 provinces, and concluded that "Confucianism has strong and lasting influence on the Chinese culture of learning since most...strongly agree with major aspects of a traditional conceptualization of education" (p. 74). For example, effort is still considered "the essential preparatory step to achieving future success" (p. 70). However, there are also transitions in certain traditional methods of learning; for instance, some students seem less reliant on memorisation and rote learning (p. 70).

With these updates of the concepts we have started out to explore in this section, we appear to have come full circle in our review of the Chinese learner and TCCL. This diversity of views has added to the richness of our understanding of these interrelated notions as well as the characteristics and transitions of PRC students as learners in the last two decades. As the focal participants of this study were essentially experiencing a study-abroad context, let us now focus on the characteristics and transitions of PRC students in such contexts.

## **1.2 The Chinese Learner in Study-abroad Contexts**

As a general introduction to this section of the review of literature, I would like to echo the observation of Byram and Feng (2006), the editors of the volume, *Living and Studying Abroad*. *Living and studying abroad may seem to offer international students*

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. Norton (2000) also found this to be true of the five immigrant women she studied in a Canadian context.

Many views have been put forward for helping international students to adjust to their study-abroad context. 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).

The participants of this current study were PRC students enrolled in NUS and were clearly in a study-abroad context. Thus, it seems appropriate to review studies on Chinese learners conducted in similar study-abroad settings. For this section of the literature review, the main focus is on more recent research on PRC learners in English-medium universities in Singapore and other countries as these are the settings most pertinent to my study. According to Shi (2006), increasing numbers of Chinese students are seeking a tertiary education in Britain. For the academic year of 2003/2004, the figure was already 48,175 and growing. In Singapore, an average of 351 SM2 and SM3 are enrolled annually in NUS CELC's Intensive English courses under the auspices of the Singapore MOE. Besides these scholarship holders in NUS, there are growing numbers of self-funding PRC students who have gained admission to NUS and the other Singapore universities' undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. It can be surmised that the numbers of PRC Chinese learners in other study-abroad settings are also significant.

### 1.2.1 Singapore Settings

Beginning with research on Chinese learners in Singapore, the studies have 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 below will attempt to trace the unfolding knowledge in a chronological order but also point out the similarities or contrasts between studies where appropriate.

In a study to investigate what learning strategies are employed by PRC 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 at a university in Singapore. The Secondary Level English Proficiency (SLEP) Test was used to assess the students' proficiency. The test results separated the learners (aged 17 to 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. With regard to proficiency, results from ANOVA 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 show that "female students reported using significantly more compensation and affective strategies than male students" (p. 17).

A learner diary was used to study the metacognitive awareness that PRC university students had about their listening (Goh, 1997). The analysis of the diaries of the 40 subjects with an average age of 19 reveals 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 used the learner diary as an instrument for longitudinal research with a small group and is thus of interest to my study.

Another study that interests me is one which examines the affective dimension of PRC learners. How anxious do these Chinese learners feel when learning English in a study-abroad context? This question was explored in Zhang in a 2001 study on PRC students enrolled in a Singapore tertiary institution. His study is particularly pertinent to the present study as the participants in both cases shared similar demographic features and educational backgrounds: PRC Chinese students (holding Singapore MOE scholarships) enrolled in a Singapore university bridging course 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 (FLCAS) and informal interviews, Zhang compared two groups of students: 70 SM3 aged around 19 and 75 SM2 with an average age of 18. The findings show that all the learners experienced a certain level of anxiety. However, on average, the SM3 group showed a higher level of anxiety right from the beginning of their course. Zhang suggests that this greater anxiety could be “attributed to differences in their biological ages, complicated, possibly, by their varying levels of proficiency in ESL.” More significantly, the difference might also be due to the “different language learning and epistemological experiences and their socio-economic backgrounds, and possibly a change in the learning environment in a study-abroad context” for the two groups. Furthermore, the SM3 students’ anxiety might be due to the lack of certain study skills for independent learning (p. 84). The results indicate that anxiety may be one category that my study should consider in its analysis.

In order to guide SM3 students to reflect on their learning journey, and develop and evaluate knowledge relating to their own person, strategies and tasks, Young and Fong (2003) carried out a longitudinal learner diary study with a group of 38 students over six months. The study found evidence that the learner diary could be one tool 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 variation to the above longitudinal study, Fong (2006b) used a summative or exit diary to gather data on the learner characteristics of PRC SM3 students. Towards the end of their six-month BC, a small sample of 17 students 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, which related 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 nor consistent. The learning context of the BC appears to have been beneficial, so is receiving positive feedback for the learning activities and the teachers' methodology, skills and personality. The learner characteristics and perceptions gleaned from this study have contributed to my current study as the initial selection of a priori categories was based on these findings.

Another research project involving CELC's SM3 students was Teng's (2008) ethnographic study of undergraduates in NUS. Among the participants was Ming (pseudonym), a "transnational"<sup>1</sup> 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. Teng examined how Ming and his peers (all former 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.

---

<sup>1</sup> While the term 'transnational' has been mostly used to refer to migrants who cross borders for political (wars) and economic (capital) reasons (Jackson et al, 2004), in this age of globalisation, one group of border crossers have created an increasingly significant movement of people between nations. These are the foreign students who go abroad for their education, especially their tertiary education. Although some return home after getting their degrees, others remain to work in those countries, even taking up citizenship in their adopted countries.

Ming's agency and investment are evidenced by his not only learning the standard variety of Singapore English used in academic settings (often called Educated Singapore English) but also the local colloquial variety ("Singlish"). He indicated that the linguistic resources he had been equipped with during his SM3 bridging course days had helped him overcome the initial difficulty he had with using English. After the bridging course, 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, interacting with locals (p. 228). During the EAP course in his first year as an undergraduate, 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 was expounded by Lave & Wenger (1991) to highlight 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 sociocultural practices of a community" (p. 29). This case study of Ming as a legitimate peripheral participant acts as a parallel study to my multiple-case research as its focal participants were also PRC SM3 and therefore the younger counterparts of Ming. There were likely to be some common characteristics and transitions between them.

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 Intensive English course; and his motivation and initiative in using strategies such as creating opportunities for language practice and self-study. As a result of his socio-cultural and academic backgrounds in China and more recent socio-cultural and academic experiences in Singapore, Ming, like many of his fellow SM3 scholars, forms "a new hybrid SM3 identity" (p. 233). Teng points out that this construction of identity takes place against the background of the formation 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, the vignette presents the process of how a transnational PRC student like Ming develops a new hybrid identity in a CALP as a result of his experiences in a new academic, linguistic and socio-cultural context. Although the analytical framework for this study is different from that for the current study, useful insights can still be drawn as to the characteristics of PRC SM3 learners and the kind of transitions they make in the NUS learning context.

### **1.2.2 Western Contexts**

Turning now to recent research carried out on PRC students in study-abroad contexts in Western countries, 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. Though some of the studies may refer to a broader group of subjects, like East Asian learners, we can assume that the PRC Chinese learners are included within the group under study. Many of the studies come from the perspectives of ELT practitioners like university teachers and administrators and it is hoped that these perspectives will offer useful insights for the present study in terms of the PRC students’ learner characteristics, transitions and pedagogical implications.

In British ELT circles, there has been a growing interest in international learners, especially the Chinese and other East Asian learners, with dedicated conferences and publications. For example, the 2004 International Conference organised by Portsmouth University had as its theme, Responding to the needs of Chinese learners in Higher Education. Many of these conferences and publications feature studies or reports on the (unmet) needs of Chinese students as learners and the socio-cultural, academic and linguistic difficulties they experience in their transition into their new learning contexts. Along with the reports on the problems, suggestions on pedagogical implications and

practical (mainly socio-cultural and administrative) support that can help 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 are wont to 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 UK 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 socio-cultural backgrounds” and regular informal meetings for staff and students at different levels (p. 142).

Chinese students’ development of reading strategies in EAP courses was the subject of another study (Leedham, Errey, & Wickens, 2004) and the findings indicate that the students did not adopt what was being taught in the first term of a pre-sessional programme and only later in the year did they start to move forward in using suitable strategies and demonstrate real learning. This study suggests that acculturation is an important consideration in the planning of pre-sessional assessment schedules for Chinese students.

Overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers is another issue facing Chinese students (Devlin & Peacock, 2006). Some Chinese students feel that the academics they encountered 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. 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 together. 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, 2006. 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, 2006). 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/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, 2006). 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. “...students 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 UK (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 UK is much more individualistic, in which academic success is measured by critical analysis and knowledge extension. Learning shock is defined as “...experiences of acute frustration, confusion and anxiety... (when) exposed to unfamiliar learning and teaching methods, bombarded by unexpected and disorientating cues and subjected to ambiguous and conflicting expectations” (Griffiths, Winstanley & Gabriel, 2005). 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 an American setting. 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 (pp. 139-140). Thus, they experience both culture shock and learning shock (p. 143) 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 (p. 145).

Looking more specifically at learner actions, in terms of strategy use, 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, 2007). The four informants, all research students, were not enrolled in a formal language programme but they tried to manage their own 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 their strategy use. However, there are no indications of strong cultural tendencies. These findings relate to my research as they suggest that learner characteristics do not operate separately but impact one another in an interrelated manner.

Based on the above findings, several implications were offered for Chinese students in study-abroad contexts. For one, understanding and empathy would be helpful for these learners in their efforts to overcome the linguistic challenges they face. Secondly, 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, do Chinese students experience any transition in a study-abroad context? Hughes and Gao (2008) reported on a longitudinal 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 setting does have an impact on the Chinese learners' beliefs with regard to their confidence/anxiety in learning and using English and the respective roles of the teacher and the student in learning. The English learning environment, it is suggested, does contribute to the students' confidence. The findings also show that the Chinese students in such a hybrid immersion context tend to take greater charge of their learning. This tendency is especially true for their language learning outside the classroom and points to the behaviour of autonomous learners. Such



a finding does not concur with the “typical” profile of passive and dependent Chinese learners in the literature. Nevertheless, 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 learner’s presence in the international educational 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 further study of issues relating to these learners (p. 36).

One aspect that the contributors to the volume take issue with is the Western view of the Chinese learner which “remain largely based on outmoded and stereotypical assumptions” (Ryan, 2010, p. 37). She asserts: “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 ‘deficits’ that their international, including Chinese, students lack “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 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” (2010, 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).

The issues of student identity and learning context were also explored in a comparative study of Chinese and Vietnamese students by Phan, McPherron & Phan (2011). Though this was not a strictly study-abroad context, the study has illuminating findings on

Chinese learners. 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 is an interesting perspective of the evolving identities of Chinese students and their English teachers in specific learning contexts.

Before we conclude this section, it may be helpful to consider yet another perspective. So far, the literature has focused on the learning experience of “the Chinese learner” in study-abroad contexts as a one-way phenomenon. However, 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).

With the above call for mutual learning, we have come full circle in our survey of literature on Chinese learners. In this section, we can see a thread that runs through the different study-abroad contexts for PRC students. There are indeed obstacles to living and learning in their new L2 contexts as mentioned by Byram and Feng (2006). However, whether these impediments appear in the form of language barriers, academic difficulties, cultural differences (local, institutional, higher education, etc.) or more personal challenges, they are not insurmountable. As demonstrated by many of the researchers above, there is growing awareness of the needs of this group of students as they make the transition to higher education in their host countries. Equally important is the increasing awareness of what changes and help are needed to support these learners. For the current study, these findings can provide insights on learner characteristics and transitions. They can also inform the pedagogical implications to be drawn from the current study to help learners succeed. These learners do want to succeed in their education abroad as a stepping stone to a bright future in life, and they are willing to make the necessary effort to achieve their goals. The example of Ming in Teng’s (2008) study 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.

### **1.3 Summing Up**

I was interested to learn about my Chinese students' learner characteristics and the transitions they experienced in their new learning context in NUS. Through my decade's experience of working with these learners, I had developed some insights of the characteristics that seemed to stand out and undergo change: beliefs, motivation, strategies, affect, identities. In the foregoing literature review, I found support for my intuition, as these themes were recurrent strands in the discussion. Accordingly, these themes, together with TCCL and the NUS learning context, would constitute the a priori categories that I would focus on in the design and data analysis of my research project, which will be discussed in the following chapter, Methodology.

## **Chapter 2: METHODOLOGY**

What kinds of methods are best suited for a qualitative study of the characteristics of a group of learners and their transitions in a new learning context? What instruments can a researcher use to collect data for a longitudinal study spanning close to five years? These were the questions I had to work through as I carried out my research project on my PRC students. In this chapter on the methodology of my study, I will give an overview of the research design and the focal participants as well as the instruments used. Throughout the overview, I will show how the design is informed by relevant literature and provide rationale for the choices of methods and instruments. Next, I will describe the process of data collection. Finally, I will conclude the chapter by explaining the decisions and steps taken during the process of analysing the data. Before we proceed further, it may be helpful to reiterate the questions which guided the research design and methodology.

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?

### **2.1 Qualitative Research**

Due to the qualitative nature of my study, I started by looking at some general principles of this branch of research. According to Denzin (2004):

Underneath the complexities and contradictions that define this field rest three common commitments. The first reflects the belief that the world of human experience must be studied from the point of view of the historically and culturally situated individual. Second, qualitative researchers will persist in working outward from their own biographies to the world of experiences that surround them. Third, scholars will continue to value and seek to produce works that speak clearly and powerfully about these worlds (p. 467).

Denzin's view of the underlying principles of qualitative research above puts into words what I have felt about my work and research as I sought to understand and support my PRC students in their learning journeys. I found that their world as learners overlapped with mine as a learner, teacher and researcher. In the Introduction, I narrated my own journey from being a young learner of both Chinese and English, due to my family background and the bilingual education policy of Singapore, to teaching English at university and researching the world of the PRC learners I came into contact with. I believe that unique experience and perspective prepared me to regard the PRC learners that came under my charge with interest and empathy. Thus, without my realising it, when I embarked on the research project, I was working out from my own experience as a once-upon-a-time L2 learner of English to the experience of these learners' transiting into an ESL context. Moreover, I wanted also to give these students a voice so that the world will see them as real people with their unique personal as well as cultural history. For the world to hear their voices, the methodology of my research must allow them to speak as authentically as possible.

The next issue I researched was, "What does qualitative research in applied linguistics entail in practice?" One of the most comprehensive coverage of this subject I came across was in Duff (2008). Among her references to literature, she quoted from Denzin and Lincoln (2005):

Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience; introspection; life story; interviews; artifacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives. Accordingly, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretive practices, hoping always to get a better understanding of the subject matter at hand. It is understood, however, that each practice makes the world visible in a different way. Hence, there is frequently a commitment to using more than one interpretative practice in any study (p. 4, cited in Duff, 2008, p. 27).

Qualitative research, as the above quotation suggests, is multi-faceted in its methods and instruments, practices and interpretations. Moreover, further reading pointed to its use in different disciplines in a variety of ways, reflecting a continuum of paradigms from “positivist to postpositivist and from modern to postmodern, and critical, using various combinations of methods” (Duff, p. 27, 28). Thus, qualitative research often embraces a broad range of research beliefs and sources of information for analysis in the process usually referred to as triangulation. “Data, methods, perspectives, theories, and even researchers can be triangulated in order to produce either converging or diverging observations and interpretations” (Duff, p. 30). Emphasis is also placed on studying and interpreting observable phenomena in context which are naturally occurring ones. It was to this richness, diversity and naturalness of qualitative research that I gravitated for my project as I was interested in the transitions in the inner landscapes of my students’ worlds as they moved from one context to another, contexts which were socio-cultural, linguistic and academic. Moreover, I intuitively sensed that no one theory or system could account for the learner characteristics they manifested, that is, not just SLA or TCCL nor motivation or L2 selves.

To complicate the matter for myself, I was aware of the debate on the value of qualitative inquiry versus quantitative research. Qualitative research is still sometimes viewed as “a less robust and less mature form of scholarly inquiry” than quantitative research (Duff, 2008, p. 31). In some perspectives, qualitative inquiry is not considered “scientific” as it is not based on quantifiable “research” that is almost synonymous as “experiments” (Richards, 2003, p. 6). However, I was heartened by a positive wind of change as qualitative research had been gaining greater recognition for its inquiry into “the non-linear, emergent, dynamic and complex interactions” within specific settings (p. 31). I was further encouraged by Silverman’s assertion that “an insistence that any research worth its salt should follow a purely quantitative logic would simply rule out the study of many interesting phenomena... The main strength of qualitative research is its ability to study phenomena which are simply unavailable elsewhere” (2006, p. 43). He adds that, in some qualitative research, small numbers of text and documents may be analysed, provided that the objectives are clear and the study has sufficient rigour and depth.

However, against this distinction between the qualitative and quantitative, we have to beware of making the mistake of perpetuating an artificial dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative research, as Richards (2003) points out. Qualitative research does not imply that there should be nothing quantitative about it. If there are times that more precise quantification can contribute to a better understanding of what we are pursuing, we do well to avail ourselves of this resource. Degrees of precision are matters to be determined in the course of the research. Richard quotes Hammersley “who puts the finger on the real issue”:

...our decisions about what level of precision is appropriate in relation to any particular claim should depend on the nature of what we trying to describe, on the likely accuracy of our descriptions, on our purposes, and on the resources available to us; not on ideological commitment to one methodological paradigm or another (Hammersley, 1992, cited in Richards, 2003, p. 11).

I found further support for taking a qualitative approach to my study of the PRC students in Richards' (2003) affirmation. He gives three strengths of qualitative inquiry, especially in TESOL. Firstly, it allows for a first-hand idea of what really takes place in classrooms, schools and communities. Secondly, the qualitative approach is a “person-centred enterprise” while human beings are complex and “wonderfully adept at confounding the sort of predictions that operate in the natural world” (p. 9). But as teachers working in a professional context, we can find mutual help in our shared insights and experiences. Thirdly, as qualitative inquiry depends on engagement with the lived world, the investigative process may have a profound impact on the researchers and, hence, a potential for transforming them.

I would like to conclude this section with Richards' (2003) very clear outline of six characteristics of qualitative research. Because of its clarity and succinctness, I have decided to reproduce below the table he uses to encapsulate what qualitative inquiry will do and will not do (p. 10):



| <b>It will:</b>  | <b>It will not:</b>   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study human actors in natural settings, in the context of their ordinary, everyday world;</li> <li>• Seek to understand the meanings and significance of these actions from the perspectives of those involved;</li> <li>• Usually focus on a small number of (possibly just one) individuals, groups or settings;</li> <li>• Employ a range of methods in order to establish perspectives on the relevant issues;</li> <li>• Base its analysis on a wide range of features;</li> <li>• Only use quantification where this is appropriate for specific purposes and as part of a broader approach.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set up artificial situations for the purpose of study or try to control the conditions under which participants act;</li> <li>• Attempt to describe human behaviour in terms of a limited set of pre-determined categories;</li> <li>• Attempt to study a large population identified on the basis of particular characteristics;</li> <li>• Base its findings on a single perspective or feature;</li> <li>• Base its analysis on a single feature;</li> <li>• Represent its findings in primarily quantitative terms.</li> </ul> |

**Table 2.1 Characteristics of Qualitative Research**

Table 2.1 above also summarises what I have attempted to do through the methodology of the current study, where I worked and reworked the research design and questions in order to achieve a robust qualitative inquiry. My study was based on real students in a natural setting: PRC students transiting from high school in China to university in Singapore, from an EFL context to an ESL one. I was seeking to understand the lived world of this small group of participants, the significance of their actions and perceptions through multiple theories (for example, TCCL and social identity, motivation and L2

selves) and instruments (diaries, interviews, autobiography and case studies). Quantification was used only when appropriate as in the analysis of the affective domain; I counted the number of times feelings were mentioned in the data. Thus, my investigation into this branch of inquiry prepared me for conducting my research project.

## 2.2 Focal Participants

The Introduction detailed how I arrived at the decision to focus on the seven NUS students who responded to the email interview. To give the reader an overview of these seven focal participants of the multiple-case qualitative study, I have summarised their vital information in Table 2.2 below:

| Pseudonym | Gender | Major for UDP             | Occupation after Graduation  |
|-----------|--------|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| SJW       | Male   | Physics                   | PhD student, NUS             |
| RYP       | Male   | Computational Biology     | Research Assistant, NUS      |
| SCC       | Male   | Quantitative Finance      | PhD student, John Hopkins U. |
| QU        | Female | Biology                   | PhD student, NUS             |
| SQ        | Female | Quantitative Finance      | Officer in a technology firm |
| QC        | Male   | Environmental Engineering | Research Assistant, NUS      |
| TC        | Male   | Physics                   | Research Assistant, NTU      |

**Table 2.2 Focal Participants of Multiple-case Study**

However, these students were not mere statistics which could be neatly tabulated. Beyond the facts that they started learning English in late childhood or early adolescence, were recruited from some of China's best universities and joined NUS at the average age of 19, they had varied regional and social backgrounds. To provide a fuller picture of them as

real people, I include some biodata they have voluntarily disclosed and some impressions I have formed in the sketches below.

**SJW** 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. SJW struck me as being a high achiever and thus his direct entry to an NUS doctorate programme was no surprise. What surprised me was how much he integrated with the community during his Student Exchange Programme (SEP) in America despite his independent personality.

**RYP** seemed the opposite of SJW, placid, as his name signifies, and preferred to take life "naturally" as it comes. However, 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. Though usually reticent, he was pleasant and much-liked by his SM3 group.

**SCC** came from the same city and university as RYP; they were both easy-going characters. However, SCC was much more visionary, envisaging a future where English would be imperative for advancement. He thus prepared himself by earnestly studying English from secondary school onwards using TCCL strategies, as well as enrolling for tuition at New Oriental School (NOS), a famous private language school. All this was made possible with strong moral and financial home support. He was probably the most successful student in his BC group, being exempted from EAP course upon matriculation.

**QU**, coming from a large city in Hubei province in Central China, was another student who 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 NOS. Her parents held intellectually demanding jobs and provided QU with computers, software, mp3 players, tapes and books. Complementing the diverse resources, she was also a determined strategist who experimented with different techniques to expedite learning. Among her female classmates, QU shone as being possibly the most articulate and exuberant.

**SQ** was the other female student among the participants. In contrast to QU, she conformed more to the image of the reticent TCCL 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, SQ mentioned that she came from the province of Shandong in North China and documented her diligent preparation for the Gaokao and her feelings surrounding that period.

**QC** came from a rural community near a relatively small city in Shaanxi province in West China. In his diary, QC documented extensively his memories surrounding his early days. 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.

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

It is hoped that these brief profiles will give the reader some idea of the focal participants before we proceed further in discussing the research design.

### **2.3 Choice of Instruments**

An important principle of current qualitative research is the triangulation of data through multiple perspectives of phenomena, which increases the internal validity of the study. However, triangulation need not be confined to the contrast or integration of participants' and researchers' perspectives. "Research methods themselves may also be triangulated (e.g., in mixed-method research), theory may be triangulated when the same phenomenon is examined through different theoretical lenses and from the standpoints of researchers in different fields, data collection techniques and results can be triangulated (e.g., observations, interviews, document analysis), and so on" (Duff, 2008, p. 143). Thus, besides studying the learners through the theoretical perspectives of SLA, TCCL and social identity, I decided to use a variety of instruments for triangulation in order to increase the validity of the study.

During my longitudinal project to study the transitions that the PRC learners made in the course of their studies, I used four instruments for triangulation. As mentioned in the Introduction, I started with the learner diary within the first year of the 38 students' joining the university. In order to study the transition of the PRC students' attributes, conceptualisations and actions, the instruments used must be able to capture the changes in their beliefs, attitudes, motivations, strategies, feelings, etc., over a substantial block of time. A learner journal, or diary for short, is thought to be a suitable tool for longitudinal qualitative studies. This strength of the diary serves my purposes well and thus I decided to adopt it as the first instrument of my project. At the end of that first year, I carried out a face-to-face interview with 36 of the original respondents to the diary study. Together these two methods of collecting data formed the first stage of my study. The second stage was conducted near the end of the students' tenure in the university. I first used an email interview and followed up with questions for clarification where necessary. From among

the seven NUS students who responded to the email questionnaire, I invited one to write an autobiographical account of his journey in learning English.

Why did I choose to use these four kinds of instruments for this study, namely, learner diaries, face-to-face interviews, email interviews and autobiography? What are their characteristics, strengths and limitations? In the following sections, I will provide an overview of the characteristics of these instruments and the reasons for my choice.

### **2.3.1 Learner Diaries**

Bloor and Wood (2006) defined the diary in research as “the recording of activities and experiences, usually in written format, within specific episodes of time” (p. 50). The approaches to using diaries in research vary basically according to the degree of structure imposed within the diary: unstructured accounts, semi-structured reports of key activities or emotions, structured logs of events with relatively little commentary. Bloor and Wood noted that diaries are often used alongside qualitative interviews with the same subject. The diary becomes an “aide-memoire” (p. 51) for both the respondent and researcher, while the interview provides the opportunity to clarify events recorded in the diary. An example of such a complementary approach was Norton’s study of five adult migrant women learning English in Canada (2000). In such cases, the subjects themselves “become adjunct ethnographers of their own circumstances” (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 51).

The advantages of using the learner diary or journal as an instrument has been well-documented, the most obvious being the ability to aid recall of events and to provide data garnered over extended time periods (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 52). Various studies have underlined the fact that diaries can provide valuable data on students’ sources of motivation (Coare & Thomson, 1996), self-analysis of difficulties and achievements (Miyuki, 2001) and their attitudes towards language learning and language in general (Flowerdew, 2002). Diaries can also reveal students’ use of strategies (Teng, 1996; Vickers & Morgan, 2003), their growth in metacognitive awareness over time (Young &

Fong, 2003) and learner characteristics (Fong, 2006b). They have also reflected the nature of language acquisition, learners' hidden anxiety and out-of-class activities (Vickers & Morgan, 2003). Pedagogically, analysing students' feedback in diaries has led teachers to plan more effective classes (Gray, 1998; Miyuki, 2001).

As for the disadvantages of using diaries in research, the possible limitations are sample bias and attrition. The commitment to keeping a diary may be prolonged and become increasingly burdensome. Furthermore, some subjects may modify their behavior as a result of reporting their activities in a diary. Thus, a diary study has to be carefully managed to avoid these pitfalls, and triangulation could be considered to mitigate the limitations.

For my study of the PRC learners' transitions in English learning, I decided on the learner diary as an initial means of collecting data for the following reasons. The diary, kept for a fairly extended period of around four months, would show up transitions, if any, in the learners' beliefs, motivation, strategies, and other factors. Secondly, I have used the diary in two previous smaller studies that convinced me of the value of the diary as a research tool (Young & Fong, 2003; Fong, 2006b). Thirdly, I wanted the students to benefit from the project and diary keeping has many advantages as mentioned in the literature. Lastly, the diary will be a valuable record to the students of their English learning in the initial stage of tertiary education.

The next question a new researcher may ask is: "How should I conduct my diary study?" Alaszewski, in his book devoted to the subject of using diaries for social research (2006), advises researchers to first decide the way they will structure the diary. They also need to explain the purpose of diary keeping and the diaries, and persuade individuals to keep one especially for the research. They may need to provide guidance on the ways they would like the diary to be kept and develop a mechanism for checking the accuracy of the records (2006, pp. 67-68).

Besides structuring the diaries and giving written instructions, more personal ways to influence the participants are face-to-face training sessions with individuals or groups and feedback on initial entries. The researchers can also address any questions from the participants through these channels. Maintaining regular contact and open communication with the diarists is crucial so that problems can be quickly identified and dealt with. Studies should be designed to be user-friendly (Alaszewski, 2006, pp. 68-71). In addition, they can also adopt the diary-interview method to encourage diarists towards focusing on issues relevant to the research.

To prepare the ground for my project, I gave to each of my SM3 students a letter introducing the diary study and inviting participation on a voluntary basis (see pp. 82-84 for a copy of the letter). I also explained details and gave time for questions. The purpose given was a general one: "I am interested in studying how Chinese students in China and abroad approach the learning of English." In the conclusion, I also added that their participation would help me and others better meet the needs of PRC students like themselves. At the UNNC, Ms Elizabeth Clark helped me distribute the letters to her Foundation Year EAP students and explain the necessary details. The students had about two weeks to decide whether to join the project and start sending entries via email. (I asked both groups for their written consent to use the data for my research and the letters they signed are available for inspection.) I usually read the diary entries within the same week or fortnight they were received and replied to any questions in the email. Where necessary or appropriate, I also encouraged the students in their learning and the personal concerns expressed. Thus, the diary project was able to sustain itself for about four months (from early February to early June 2006).

### **2.3.2 Interviews**

Bloor and Wood (2006) define interviews as "the elicitation of research data through questioning of respondents" (p. 104). They further distinguish between quantitative (or 'structured') interviews and qualitative (or 'semi-structured', or 'depth', or 'ethnographic') interviews. The former have a semi-formal character and are conducted



in surveys with a standardized schedule while the latter have a more informal conversational character, informed partly by the interviewer's pre-existing topic guide and partly by the emerging concerns during the interview.

What general principles on interviewing are there to guide a new researcher like me who was using this method for the first time? Silverman makes four observations about interviews (2006, p. 112):

1. No special skills are required ...it involves just trying to interact with that specific person, trying to understand their experience, opinion, ideas ...
2. The interview is collaboratively produced. Both interviewer and interviewee use their mundane skills.
3. Interviewers are active participants. While qualitative interviewers do not attempt to monopolize the conversation, neither do they fade into the background.
4. *No one interviewing style is 'best'* ...There are no principled grounds to assume that 'passivity' or 'activity' works best...

In observations 2 and 3 above, Silverman highlights the collaborative nature of interviews while 1 and 4 indicate that he may not put emphasis on any special or formal interview skills or styles.

By contrast, Richards (2003), while he also advocates a collaborative relationship between interviewer and interviewee, underlines the importance of interview types, techniques, structure, evaluation and analysis as the qualitative interview needs to "go deeper, to pursue understanding in all its complex, elusive and shifting forms; and to achieve this we need to establish a relationship with people that enables us to share in their perception of the world" (p. 50). He stresses the need to develop good, open-minded listening and self-critical interactional skills as the researcher hones his judgement in his craft of interviewing.

In terms of the techniques, beginning with sensitive listening, interviewers should also be supportive in response, prompting and checking where appropriate. They should also consider the question types used and their potential contribution to eliciting the information required (Richards, 2003, pp. 56-57). An elicitation technique that is useful as a “default pattern of enquiry is that of progressive focusing...begin with a general question, then gradually focus in on more specific features” (p. 72). Another technique involves offering a metaphor or telling a story, or even showing a picture; this can avoid getting a stock response that is often given to straightforward questions.

How is the interview impacted by the relative social positions of the interviewee and interviewer? According to Miller and Glassner (2004), “this is a practical concern...as a result of social distances, interviewees may not trust us, they may not understand our questions, or they may purposely mislead us in their responses” (pp. 127-128). On the other hand, they assert that social differences may be used to advantage if they allow individuals to articulate their feelings about their life experiences, especially when the interviewees can recognise themselves as experts on a subject to someone usually considered socially superior. It is both “empowering and illuminating” (p. 132). Thus, interviewers should work at building rapport through “establishing trust and familiarity, showing genuine interest, assuring confidentiality, and not being judgmental” (p. 133).

What media can we exploit for conducting interviews in qualitative research? Normally, qualitative interviews are conducted face to face but it may sometimes be difficult, for various reasons, to set up mutually feasible meeting times or venues. Telephone interviews can be arranged instead, though they could prove to be an imperfect and possibly challenging substitute. In this case, the interview can be recorded using audio equipment. Email interviews have also been “increasingly” used to take the place of face-to-face interviews (Duff, 2008, p. 135). In my study, I set up face-to-face interviews in Stage 1 for both the NUS and UNNC groups by inviting all thirty-eight diarists to meet me at a time convenient to them. They had only to indicate via email the time they had chosen within a certain time frame (three days for the 17 UNNC students and two weeks for the NUS ones). The choice of venue was a little more restricted, however, because of

the need to record the interviews. I used my office and desktop computer with the NUS group and a classroom and an mp3 player for the UNNC sample. The interviews for both groups were conducted and recorded towards the first year of their joining NUS and UNNC respectively, which concluded Stage 1 in the research design.

Having surveyed the literature in this section, I was mindful of the different aspects of interviews as an instrument. Thus, for my study, though I had not undergone formal training in interviewing techniques, I drew on my background as a language and communication teacher to conduct the interviews. The preceding ten years of contact with PRC students in NUS also helped me in my efforts to be a sensitive and supportive interviewer to these young learners. Before the face-to-face interviews proper began with my former SM3 BC students, I spent some minutes “catching up” with each of them on their latest news. It was gratifying to know that most of them had adjusted well to NUS after leaving the BC. With the UNNC students, I met them for the first time at a café on campus prior to the interviews (as arranged by Ms Clark). I was happy to buy all of them a drink: tea or coffee or soft drinks. I was genuinely interested to get acquainted with them after having read and responded to their entries for about four months earlier in the year. Some of them were shy at first but warmed up as the hour passed; others were quite curious to know me better. One of them even offered to show me her hometown, Shaoxing, which is the same as that of Lu Xun, when she knew my interest in the celebrated Chinese wartime writer. During the interviews later in the week, I tried to continue building rapport and show my appreciation for their contribution to the study. When any participant showed hesitation, I would wait, or where it seemed necessary, to prompt or suggest. If they indicated that they had no more to say, I did not hold them back.

As for the structure of the face-to-face interview, the students were already given the ten prompts of the interview with my email invitation (see pp. 85-87 for the prompts). I invited them to start with any of the prompts and they were also free to respond to any prompts they were interested to talk about and omit the others. For the email interview, the five questions were sent to both NUS and UNNC students with the email invitation,

and I informed the students that they “could answer all or any of them in [their] reply [and] expand on any question...” (see pp. 89-91 for the prompts). Thus, both interviews can be classified as semi-structured or semi-formal. As to question types, there was a variety of questions for both interviews. I used some direct questions, believing that it was appropriate for the good rapport between the students and me. For the email interview, I adopted the use of a metaphor for Question 2 which asks: “If you compare your learning of English to a journey, how would you describe where you are now?” Thus, I learnt that techniques in interviewing call for the researcher’s judgement as much as in other aspects of the research.

### **2.3.2.1 Transcription**

Bloor and Wood (2006) define transcription as “a technical typing procedure for representing spoken discourse in text... (which) captures and freezes in time the spoken discourse that is of interest to the researcher” (p. 166). Many researchers consider this stage of the research to be “tedious, time-consuming and unproblematic” (p. 167). As a result, transcription is often delegated to secretarial staff or contracted out to transcribers. However, some researchers feel that self-transcription affords the opportunities to engage in early data analysis. The process of close and repeated listening allows the researcher to become familiar with and immersed in the data leading to a deeper understanding of the data.

“A number of alternative systems have been developed by researchers... which strive to improve the reliability of transcribed data through the systematic and standardized representation of how speech is delivered” (Bloor & Wood, p. 167). There are symbols for pitch, accent, intonation, truncations, overlaps, pauses, etc. Richards (2003) includes a note on transcription conventions in the chapter on collection and analysis of spoken interaction (see table 2.3 below for a sample, adapted from pp.173-174), while advocating that transcriptions should “describe the talk as fully but as simply as possible” (p. 182), that is, to “aim for maximum readability without sacrificing essential features” (p. 81).

|   |                               |  |
|---|-------------------------------|--|
| .   | Falling intonation            | That was foolish.                            |
| ,   | Continuing contour            | I took the bread, butter, jam and honey      |
| ?   | Questioning intonation        | Who was that?                                |
| !   | Exclamatory utterance         | Look!  |
| (2.0)   | Pause of about 2 seconds      | So (2.0) what are we going to do?            |
| (...)   | *Pause of about 1 second      | <i>In front of the (...) the table</i>       |
| (.)   | *Pause of about 0.5 second    | Then (..) she just (..) left                 |
| (.)   | Micropause                    | Put it (.) away                              |
| (xxx)   | Unable to transcribe          | <i>We'll just (xxx) tomorrow</i>             |
| > <   | Quicker than surrounding talk | <i>&gt;I'd just&lt; leave it where it is</i> |
| *Conversation analysts time to tenths of a second, e.g. '(0.60)'. |                               |  |

**Table 2.3 A Note on Transcription Conventions (A Sample)**

The two general principles emphasised by Richards are similar to the features stressed by Edwards and Lampert (1993): “‘authenticity’ (the need to preserve the information in a manner true to the original interaction) and ‘practicality’ (the need to respect the way in which the data are to be managed and analysed, for example by ensuring the transcripts are easy to read)” (cited in Bloor & Wood, p. 167). These two goals are considered to be in conflict with each other as the inclusion of nuances of the discourse through transcription symbols can distract the reader from the meaning of the contents. For the researcher unfamiliar with the detailed transcription symbols, the transcript will be more time-consuming to read as well as inadequate in representing the natural flow of the original speech. A compromise between readability and faithful representation can be achieved through researchers’ decision on what level of transcription is required for their own research purposes.

Beyond the level of delicacy in representing the nuances of the interview, there are other practical problems related to transcription: the time and cost of transcription. For

example, it has been estimated that it can take up to twenty hours to transcribe one hour of interview data (Duff, 2008, p. 155). The estimates vary according to the speed and proficiency of the transcriber, the quality of the audio-recording and the degree of details included. Alternatives like coding directly from the audio-recordings or using real-time observational coding have been suggested but these have been found to be unreliable and data are not available for examination and replication later (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999, cited in Bloor & Wood, 2006). Voice recognition software which translates spoken words into written words in a word processing document has been explored by some researchers. But these do not prove quick alternatives as researchers have first to ‘train’ the software to recognize their voice, which eliminates the possibility of using it for data with more than one voice (p. 168). Moreover, certain non-verbal behaviours are not likely to add to interesting/relevant information for the research purposes. A very fine tuned transcription may in fact impede readability (Duff, 2008, p. 155).

As I was working full-time, I could not transcribe the 38 interviews myself but engaged a senior NUS English Language undergraduate student with a good command of the language to transcribe the interviews for me. I subsequently checked and rechecked the transcriptions as I listened repeatedly to the recordings. In terms of the level of “delicacy” for the transcription, I decided to go for Richards’ maxim to “describe the talk as fully but as simply as possible” (2003, p. 182). I was interested in the content of the respondents’ interviews so as to learn what kinds of transitions had transpired in the first year of their tertiary studies and not the process of any possible social construction taking place.

### **2.3.3 Autobiography and Case Studies**

My data collection culminated in a narrative account by one of the focal participants, TC, on his English learning journey. This last instrument I used was in keeping with the broad to narrow, general to specific approach that I adopted for my study. It was akin to the autobiography or biography used by other applied linguistics researchers before me. What are some examples that can illuminate my investigation on the use of autobiographies as an instrument for my study? I started my search by looking at such accounts in the

literature which shed light on the linguistic experiences of the writers or their subjects. In the literature review, we have already come across two examples through Shen's (1998) and Lu's (1998) accounts. As we have seen a fairly detailed sketch of the identity negotiation in Shen's English learning journey, let us now turn our attention to Lu's story as the first example that can offer some insights on the use of autobiographies to study the learner characteristics and transitions of the PRC students.

As a high school student in China during the 1950s, Lu lived at the cross-section between two different worlds, ideologies, cultures and languages. Her struggles to keep separate the discourses of home and school, Standard Chinese and English, led her into confusion and frustration (Lu, p. 78), and eventually silence. As an illustration, she described her internal conflict when she had to write a book report for school. However, as an English composition teacher in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, she believed that she should not teach her students only "to 'survive' the whirlpool of crosscurrents by avoiding it"; instead she should "[m]oderate the currents but teach them from the beginning to struggle". For she looked back with a feeling almost like gratitude to the complexity of her own learning journey which "kept [her] from losing sight of the effort and choice involved in reading or writing with and through a discourse" (p. 83). It is possible that Lu's autobiographical account of her journey from being a student living in conflict between two discourses to becoming a teacher valuing struggle in attaining academic literacy would inspire other students making a similar journey. Interestingly, Lu might have been gratified to know that, in the early 1990s, a PhD student from China studying in the United States was indeed learning how to struggle while negotiating the linguistic and cultural transformation that he experienced. His autobiographical account of this struggle has been captured as a book chapter, *Writing from Chinese to English: My Cultural Transformation*, in the volume, *Reflections on Multiliterate Lives* (Liu, 2001). This student, Jun Liu, went on to become President of TESOL in 2006-2007.

In highlighting some recent developments of case studies which focus on "L2 teachers, students, events and sites using more humanistic narrative traditions that emphasize personal voice, identity, affect, agency and lived experience", Duff (2008) cited some

well-known examples of autobiographical or biographical accounts of linguistic experiences. Among these works are Hoffman's (1989) autobiography, *Lost in Translation*; Kaplan's (1993) narrative, *French Lessons*; and Schumann's (1997) volume, *The Neurobiology of Affect in Language*. Hoffman describes her experiences as a young Polish migrant to Canada and then the United States, and reflects on her English language learning in her book (cited in Duff, 2008, p. 77). Kaplan narrates her experiences, desires as well as disappointments as a French student in Europe and the United States, to the time she taught alongside expatriate native French speakers (cited in Duff, 2008, p. 78). Schumann, on the other hand, provides a detailed analysis of autobiographies, biographies and diary studies in L2 learning, along with social, psychological and neuroscientific insights of affect in language learning (cited in Duff, 2008, p. 78).

Thus, the above examples demonstrate that the autobiography can be a very useful instrument for gathering data on a focal participant's learning journey, to learn about his/her particular learner characteristics and the transitions he/she undergoes. With that in mind, after identifying the focal participant who was most suitable for the task, I invited TC to write his autobiography (see p. 92 for my email to TC). TC's account indeed added rich details that were not given before in his learner diary or interviews. For the first time, he mentioned his childhood, his parents and English tuition classes. I was also given a glimpse of his most recent experiences: an encounter during his Student Exchange Programme in the United States and his attempt to rent a room after his graduation.

As the autobiography is often used as an instrument for case studies, I next investigated the use of case studies in qualitative study. As Richards (2003) points out, "case study" means different things to different people. While some equate the term with qualitative research, others allow that case studies can be quantitative. There are also those who approach it as a paradigm while some see it as little more than a method. Richards concludes that "[a]ll that really matters is that the focus of the research is a particular unit or set of units", such as institutions, programmes, events, with the objective of providing "a detailed description of the units"(p. 20). The methods can include multiple possibilities, for example, interviews supported by observations and recordings, narrative



accounts and descriptive vignettes. The aim is a rich picture of the participants' experiences within a particular setting (p. 21).

In her survey of the literature from different fields, ranging from education to political science, Duff (2008) summarises "the key recurring principles" of case studies, which are "boundedness or singularity, in-depth study, multiple perspectives or triangulation, particularity, contextualization, and interpretation" (p. 23). Accordingly, case studies may be used to explore and describe phenomena, to test or build theory, to generate or illustrate hypotheses, leading to a holistic understanding of a complex entity (p. 32).

Against this rich diversity afforded by case studies, of particular interest to my study is the insight that case studies may involve more than one subject or participant; these are sometimes called multiple-case studies or collective case studies. One such example of a multiple-case study is Morita's PhD research project on the academic discourse socialisation experiences of six Japanese women students at a Canadian university. Self-reports, interviews, and classroom observations collected over one academic year provided "an in-depth, longitudinal analysis of the students' perspectives about their class participation across the curriculum" (Morita, 2004, p. 573). Focusing on three case studies, Morita illustrates the issues faced by the students and their attempts "to shape their own learning and participation by exercising their personal agency and actively negotiating their roles or positionalities, in their classroom communities" (Morita, 2004, p. 590). Since my current study involved data from seven focal participants collected over four and a half years, it can therefore be referred to as a longitudinal, multiple-case study or a collective case study, like Morita (2004).

How has this branch of research developed in recent decades? Early case study participants in the 1970s were often either the researchers themselves or their close associates, and the use of diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, and reflective essays has continued into the present, for example, Belcher and Connor (2001). Another development in this tradition of case study research is the call for greater focus on context which refers to the "constellation of linguistic, sociolinguistic, sociological, and other

systems” surrounding the case study (Duff, 2008, p. 37). This is a development that has implications for the present study which examines the focal participants in their new L2 context in NUS.

Finally, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the case study approach? The small number of participants is often cited as the chief weakness as the possibility for generalisability seems to be precluded. Subjectivity is another oft-cited disadvantage. However, these perceived disadvantages can be addressed or limited in their force with careful attention to the processes of sampling, analysis and interpretation. Duff (2008) suggests that the primary advantage of the case study is “the richness of description and detailed contextualization possible” because of the focus on one case or a small number of cases (p. 59). This to me more than compensates for its limitations as I have learnt in the process of carrying out my study.

## **2.4 Research Design and Timeline**

In Section 2.2 above, I described in detail the seven focal participants for this research project, and in 2.3, the rationale for my choice of instruments. These instruments comprised the learner diaries and the face-to-face interviews used during the first year or Stage 1 of the participants’ studies, and the email interview and the autobiography in their final year (Stage 2). In this section, 2.4, I will describe the research design around these two stages and provide a clear timeline of the procedures. To provide the reader with an overview, I include below a table showing the two stages, the timeline, the process of data collection and instruments, and the participants.

| Stage | Time                          | Process of Data Collection   | Participants  |
|-------|-------------------------------|--|---|
| 1     | January 2006                  | Invited participants for study.<br>Requested signed consent.   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>21 NUS SM3 BC (12 Male, 9 Female)</li> </ul>   |
|       | February 2006                 | Started collecting diary entries.<br>Diarists mainly sent entries via email, except for a few hard copies from NUS group.  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>17 UNNC EAP (3 Male, 14 Female)</li> </ul>     |
|       | June 2006                     | Collected last entries.  | Total of 38 students with an average age of 19, all having passed the NCEE or Gaokao. |
|       | September 2006                | Interviewed UNNC students face to face from 25 <sup>th</sup> to 28 <sup>th</sup> (about a year after students joined UNNC).<br>Recordings made on mP3 player.  | 17 UNNC EAP   |
|       | November 2006 to January 2007 | Interviewed NUS students face to face (about a year after students arrived in NUS). Recordings made on office desktop computer.  | 19 NUS former SM3 BC students and now undergraduates                                  |
| 2     | July and August 2010          | Invited NUS and UNNC participants to respond to email interview. Sent one reminder 4 days after first invitation. (Replies received from 7 NUS graduates from the 6 <sup>th</sup> July up till 13 <sup>th</sup> August. None from UNNC). | 7 NUS former SM3 BC students and now graduates  |
|       | September 2010                | Identified and invited one NUS participant on the 5 <sup>th</sup> to write an autobiographical account of his learning journey. He accepted on the 6 <sup>th</sup> and sent his narrative on the 12 <sup>th</sup> .                      | 1 NUS former SM3 BC student and now graduate  |

**Table 2.4 Overview of Time Frame, Data Collection and Participants**

### **2.4.1 Stage 1: Learner Diary and Face-to-face Interview**

In January 2006, I invited 21 SM3 Bridging Course (BC) students comprising one group that I was assigned to teach, from January to June 2006 in NUS, to participate in the project, beginning with keeping a learner diary. On average, the students were 19 in age, all having finished Senior Middle 3 (and hence the acronym SM3) in China and passed the National College Entrance Exam (NCEE), popularly known as Gaokao (a transliteration from the Chinese acronym for NCEE; literally “high exam”). In fact, these students had already enrolled as first year students in some of the better, if not best, universities in different parts of China. Like the rest of their SM3 cohort, they had arrived at NUS in late December 2005 as scholars handpicked by Singapore’s Ministry of Education to study at two of the local universities, and thereafter to serve a six-year bond. These scholarships and the subsequent bonds were the result of an agreement between the Singapore and Chinese governments after they “established closer diplomatic ties in the 1990s” (Lee, 2007). The 21 students were thus among the *crème de la crème* of Chinese youth, with impressive scholastic records, especially in Mathematics and the Sciences. Their English results in the Gaokao must have been creditable too, for them to have been enrolled in the better Chinese universities. However, the students were not yet very fluent nor confident in their use of English in the first weeks of starting the BC. For most of them, they did not have the opportunity use English for authentic communication in the EFL situation in China. However, over the month of January, when I met them in class once a week, and interacted with them sometimes outside of class, I could sense a gradual growth in familiarity with the language they were to learn in the BC. I was also getting to know each of them better and felt they were becoming more comfortable with me compared to the beginning of the BC. Thus, it was then that I introduced the project and invited their participation.

In order to also collect data from UNNC for a comparative study, according to the initial research design as explained in the Introduction, I had made contact with Ms Elizabeth Clark, an EAP tutor, and discussed my plans with her via email. She agreed to help me invite volunteer participants for the project and, synchronously in January 2006, she also

extended the invitation to her Foundation Year EAP students. Similar to the SM3 students, her students were around the age of 19 and had graduated from senior middle school after Gaokao. In addition to their academic records, they were admitted to UNNC after taking entrance exams on site. In contrast to the NUS SM3 students, however, they were fee-paying students. I became acquainted with them via the diary entries they sent me and really got to “know” some of them who were more open about their struggles with their academic and linguistic experiences and even personal issues. When I met them in September 2006 prior to and during the face-to-face interviews, they were no strangers to me.

All 21 of my SM3 group (12 male and 9 female) agreed to participate in the diary project while 17 of Ms Clark’ students (14 female and 3 male) took part. The letter of invitation together with the prompts had been given to each of these 38 volunteers in January 2006; it is reproduced below in Figure 2.1 for the reader’s reference. The NUS students who agreed to participate in the study gave their written consent by signing at the end of their copy of the letter and returning it to me. The letters with the written consent of the UNNC students were collected by UNNC Office and posted to me.

### **A letter to UNNC and NUS Students**

Centre for English Language Communication  
The National University of Singapore  
10 Kent Ridge Crescent  
Singapore 119260  
Email: [elcfys@nus.edu.sg](mailto:elcfys@nus.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.nus.edu.sg/celc](http://www.nus.edu.sg/celc)

11 January 2006

Hello!

I am a postgraduate student with the University of Nottingham as well as a lecturer at the National University of Singapore. I am interested in studying how Chinese students in China and abroad approach the learning of English. To gather data for this research, I have identified two groups of Chinese students: one in the University of Nottingham Ningbo, China (UNNC) and the other in the National University of Singapore (NUS).

I now invite you to participate in my study by writing a **diary entry at least once a fortnight over the next 20 weeks or so**. You can use any of the prompts on the next page to help you in your reflection. You need not write on all of them in one entry. You can even choose one aspect for a particular entry and elaborate on it. Please do write freely and candidly on how you think and feel. Do not worry about grammar or spelling (but I hope I can understand your meaning! ☺).

Your participation in this study will contribute to a greater understanding of Chinese learners. This in turn will help educators and others better meet the needs of future generations of Chinese students learning English. So your participation is very significant!

I look forward to your partnership in this venture. Thank you very much. Happy writing!

Yours truly

Fong Yoke Sim

FONG Yoke Sim (Ms)

PS: You may like to begin with:

Dear Diary,

**Prompts for reflection:**

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, eg. listening, writing, etc.?

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

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, eg. Ms Z.

### **Figure 2.1 Letter of Invitation for Diary Project with 9 Prompts**

The prompts included in the letter above were designed for two purposes. On the one hand, they were designed to jolt the memory and help the diarists to reflect on various facets of their L2 learning experience and to articulate the related thoughts, feelings, words and actions during the week or fortnight. On the other hand, the prompts were designed to capture the above thoughts, feelings, words and actions for my study into the learner characteristics of these students and the transitions they experienced in their new, L2 context. Each of the prompts probed their perceptions of one or more of the following aspects of their learning: context, affect, strategies, motivation, beliefs, self-monitoring, curriculum, metacognitive awareness and transitions. These embedded initial themes or categories were selected based on my review of literature on SLA and Chinese learners, my teaching experience and past research.

The diary was used to collect data over a period of 20 weeks. The students were encouraged to write as least once a fortnight and then submit the entries via email. A few of the students submitted hard copies for certain weeks. Altogether, I collected 220 diaries entries: 137 entries were submitted by the NUS sample while the UNNC diarists turned in 83 entries. The analysis process of the diaries will be described in Section 2.5.

After a preliminary analysis of the diary entries during which I added codes, margin notes and summaries, a face-to-face interview was conducted with the participants individually. Besides the purpose of triangulation, the interview was to follow up on recurring themes found in the diaries. The UNNC sample was invited to the interview by Ms Elizabeth

Clark via her email on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2006. This was about a year after they students started their EAP course in UNNC. The students were informed that I would be on site from 25<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> September to interview them; Ms Clark assured them that it was “just a friendly chat and not like an exam.” All 17 UNNC diarists turned up for their interview (one of them on the 28<sup>th</sup>, after having missed her first interview timeslot); their interviews were recorded on an mp3 player I brought with me to UNNC. I invited the NUS subjects also by email on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2006 to come to my office for an interview. They could make appointments at times convenient to them. This was also about a year after they started their SM3 BC. Between late November 2006 and early January 2007, 19 of the original 21 NUS diarists gave the interviews which were recorded on my office desktop computer. The other two students did not reply to my email; they had been generally less engaged with the group during the SM3 BC.

For their face-to-face interviews, both the UNNC and NUS students were invited to answer the ten basic questions which were sent with the email invitation to allow the interviewees to prepare themselves if they so wished. Reproduced below is the email to the NUS sample and the interview questions appended to the email (Figure 2.2). The UNNC students received a similar version of the email.

**From:** Fong Yoke Sim  
**Sent:** Monday, November 13, 2006 5:30 PM  
**Subject:** Request: Short interview to complete research  
**Importance:** High

Dear All

How are you? I hope you are all well. It has been a hectic semester for us all. Thankfully, the semester is coming to an end.

During the SM3 course, you kindly helped me by writing diaries on your English learning. Once again, thank you.

I now have a further request. To complete my data collection, I would like to have a short interview with each of you, for just 15 to 30 minutes. I understand you are all busy and so won't keep you beyond half an hour.



If you could help me, I would really appreciate it. Can you reply to this email or call me (65168879 / 90171570) to make an appointment? Any time you are free during these 2 weeks is fine (even evenings). It can be after the exam but I hope to see you before you leave for home. As I need to record what you say on my computer, I hope you don't mind coming to my office (AS4 02-12).

To give you some idea, I am copying the questions for the interview below. You may answer any number of the questions. You can even concentrate on one or two questions. You can also bring in related issues not in the questions. My main purpose is to get a fuller picture of how Chinese students go about learning English.

I really look forward to hearing from you. All the best for your exam preparation.

Warm regards  
Fong YS

### **Interviews of NUS SM3 diarists November/December 2006**

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 (eg. 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]

**Figure 2.2: Email Invitation for Face-to-face Interview with 10 Prompts**

Though the above questions appear to be very direct, I believed that this was the best approach in this research situation. I needed the questions to be as plain as possible to these young L2 learners so that they would understand what was asked for and supply the data needed for my study. Moreover, because of the good rapport between the students and me, I felt confident that they would take well to the directness. These questions were designed to guide the students towards summing up their thoughts and experiences and each elicited information on one important aspect relating to these ESL learners' experience as culled from the literature on SLA and Chinese learners. The themes of motivation, beliefs, strategies, self-monitoring, autonomy and the affective dimension pertain to SLA in general while the others like teachers' role, differences between learning English in China and in Singapore, perceptions of/feelings towards English and western culture and the study context apply to these ESL learners and TCCL specifically. These themes are named in square brackets after each question. Depending on my knowledge of each individual student and how the interview was going, I also asked from one to three additional questions which were formulated after the preliminary analysis of the data from the diary entries. They are as follows:

11. Do you have anything else to share with me about how you or Chinese students learn English? [Factors volunteered by students]

12. As I read the diaries, I find that hard work is emphasized. It seems that some of you think that if you work hard anything is possible. Do you think that is true for learning English? [Effort or hard work]

13. Do you think there is anything unique or special in the way Chinese students learn English? [Unique feature]

The students did not have to respond to all the questions; they could focus on any number of the question prompts. I encouraged them on by emphasising that their answers would contribute to the understanding of PRC learners, which in turn would help teachers and curriculum designers to better provide the necessary support for Chinese students like themselves.

The interviews were transcribed between June 2007 and June 2009 by an NUS Arts and Social Sciences student whom I engaged for the task in her third and Honours years. When I checked them subsequently, I filled the gaps by listening repeatedly to the recordings until I could “catch” the unclear segments. The finalised transcriptions were then read a few times for the analysis which will be described in Section 2.5.

#### **2.4.2 Stage 2: Email Interview and Autobiography**

In the Introduction, I have described the setback due to illness and medical leave (from both work and studies) in 2007. Even after I resumed both full-time work and re-registered my studies in 2008, I had to adjust the pace I could work on my research. However, during this detour, I had opportunity to take in the scenery along a different route and came to a more qualitative frame of mind for my study. From the data already collected, I saw the potential of the qualitative approach and of my privileged insider perspective as teacher/researcher.

Moreover, my project had extended beyond the initial plan of studying the students in their first year at university. Thus, in consultation with my supervisors, I decided on the

direction of a longitudinal qualitative study involving both NUS and UNNC students. A summative “exit” email interview with five questions to provide “closure” to the process of data gathering was prepared and it was decided that a suitable time to conduct the interview was around the participants’ graduation. An email with the interview questions was sent to all the students of the original NUS and UNNC samples who participated in the diary research in order to get as many responses as possible. An email interview was chosen over a face-to-face one as the students had mostly graduated and moved out of campus; it was unlikely that they would/could attend a face-to-face interview. I also expected that only a small number of students would respond, due to their adjustments to work and social life as fresh graduates. With this exit interview, I hoped to garner information on the students’ transitions over the duration of their UDP, with probably more in-depth data from a small group of respondents. However, after nearly a month, only seven of the NUS graduates eventually sent their responses to the interview. By then, it was decided that the project would follow its natural course and be reshaped as a longitudinal multiple case-study of these seven, and now focal, participants.

Reproduced below is the email (Figure 2.3) I wrote to the NUS graduating students which also carried the five interview questions. The email to the UNNC sample was slightly modified to fit their situation.

**From:** Fong Yoke Sim  
**Sent:** Tuesday, July 06, 2010 5:22 PM  
**Subject:** Congratulations on your Commencement!

Dear Group 5

Congratulations to you all for your Commencement! I am very happy and proud to know that you are graduating from NUS this or next week. It must be a very exciting time for you, your families, friends and teachers!

I hope you are all well. It’s been some months since we had our reunion dinner at my home. If you would like to drop by my office after your Commencement Ceremony,

you are very welcome. Just give me a call or text message (90171570) to make sure I am not at a meeting or on leave.

Many of you have asked me about the research I conducted with you during the bridging course. Thank you for your interest now and for your help then. Your diaries and interviews have provided very useful insights. And with your graduation, my study has come full circle. I hope I can gather your views on your English learning journey at this very significant point in time.

I have 5 questions below. If you could answer all or any of them in your reply, I would be most grateful. Please feel free to expand on any question you find most relevant to you. In your email, could you also state that you give me permission to use your answers in my research? Thank you!

This is voluntary so do not feel obliged to reply if it is not convenient for you in any way. You have already given me much help in the past. But it will be significant to have this latest information. It will help me to present a “complete” picture of your learning process and also help future PRC SM3 and other students. Thank you once more in advance for your assistance!

All best wishes  
FYS

### **Questions for Email Interview**

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

### **Figure 2.3 Email Invitation for Email Interview with 5 Prompts**

The five questions were designed to capture the participants' reflections on the different stages of their learning journey and to elicit the transitions that the learners had experienced during their journey through their respective universities.

Question 1 aims to elicit participants' perceptions of their English at the beginning of their BC or Foundation Year and the changes that have taken place in their four-year UDP. It is also important for the research to probe the factors that have contributed to the changes.

Question 2 is framed in the metaphor of a journey to help participants picture the stage/phase they have arrived at. Information on their feelings and thoughts (the affective domain) for having come thus far would help illuminate their perception of their success (or shortfall) in their English learning.

Question 3 probes what the significant experiences/people the participants have met during their learning journey. The examples given are meant to jolt their memories of the possible experiences related to their academic and social contexts in NUS and in Singapore.

Question 4 harks back to their bridging course to find out what the students see as most helpful and challenging, and what skill and knowledge they feel they have achieved. It also seeks to find out how they now view what was once challenging to them and the reasons for these perceptions.

Question 5 solicits the participants' views on where their UDP has been most helpful in terms of their English learning. It would also be significant to see what they offer as the

most useful advice to a newly matriculated PRC student (“a junior”) on the same programme. That would reveal what they themselves consider as essential to succeeding as an English learner.

The last step of my data collection was to invite one student to write an autobiographical account of his English learning experience. Among the seven focal participants, TC, seemed to be enthusiastic in his responses to the exit email interview. He readily sent me further email messages in which he articulated his reflections on his English learning journey as well as the learning experiences of PRC students in general. Thus, he was in my estimation the most suitable participant to ask to write the narrative account. With that in mind, I invited TC to write a story of his English learning experience. Upon his acceptance, I sent him the following instructions in a fairly informal email:

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 4 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 v helpful for other students and teachers like me.

Within a week, TC forwarded his story to me, narrating his journey from childhood until the time of writing. That completed my data collection for this study in September 2010, nearly five years after I initiated the diary component in January 2006.

To sum up the research design and timeline of my research, I started with 38 participants with the aim of investigating their learner characteristics and their transitions in a new L2 context. Due to natural attrition along the way, I narrowed the focus, “zooming” in on a smaller number of seven focal participants. For this serendipitous development in my research design, I found support and precedence in the examples on mixed-method designs/studies given by Duff (2008). Studies could

conduct a survey (e.g., involving questionnaires) and then follow up with a small number of respondents who indicate a willingness to take part in additional research and who represent important sectors or types of cases within the larger survey. The survey then also allows the researcher to establish the representativeness of the cases presented...Another approach is to conduct a larger qualitative study, of multiple institutions, for example, and then concretize the analysis by including case studies of individual institutions and their ecology of teachers/employees, administrators, or students/clients to illustrate general trends or differences among the sites...(p. 111)

Norton's selection of five focal participants also followed a multi-stage and multi-method strategy (2000). Thus, I was confident at this stage that my methodology was still robust with sufficient rigour despite the small number of participants.

## **2.5 Analysis**

### **2.5.1 Coding of Data**

Having collected a sizeable amount of data that the participants had so painstakingly supplied, I wanted to ensure that I did justice to their efforts and to this project. Thus, I investigated what analysis in qualitative inquiry entailed. I learnt that the identification of key features and relationships in the data was important for categorisation, which would have already taken place in the conceptualisation of the research aims. As the project unfolded, more specific categories would be developed.

To generate a set of initial labels from which categories can be later derived, one can engage immediately with the data (Richards, 2003, p. 273). To do that, he suggests that one can approach the task by coding paragraphs or even larger sections but it is probably most productive to work on a line by line approach. This rough initial coding will give rise to a number of possible and relevant categories. At this stage, the focus is likely to be adequate and precise coverage rather than organisation. Besides the data, categorisation may be based on a range of other related sources such as memos, notes, observations, readings and the theoretical contexts.



Duff (2008) concurs with Richards (2003) above that data analysis can begin early, such as from the beginning of the data collection and transcription stages, leading to a contact summary: a short summary or the most salient point and themes of an observation or interview, for instance. This approach was one of those I adopted for the data analysis of my project; I wrote short summaries after the preliminary analysis of the diary and face-to-face interviews in Stage 1 of the data collection process.

The next step, after the initial coding and categorization of the data, is systematic organisation of the categories. The researcher has many techniques at his or her disposal which may be used in this stage, from using filing cards to utilising computer software. It is important to find a method that allows relationships to become apparent and alternative arrangements to be tried and evaluated. It is also important to feel connected to the data and individuals may have different perspectives on this connectivity. For example, Wolcott emphasises the physicality of the process. “My stack of cards or paper may seem archaic in this computer age but I describe them to help you visualize processes partly hidden by technology” (2001, p. 43).

One of the best known approaches to analysis in qualitative research is offered by grounded theory which originated with Glaser and Strauss (1967). It has made important contributions to the qualitative tradition particularly through its exploration of the relationship between data gathering and theory generation. 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 his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. The process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory (Glaser and 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, though it has elements advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1998), is not based entirely on grounded theory. While I did jointly collect, code and analyse my data and decide what data to collect next and where to find them, I also had pre-determined categories of learner characteristics in mind prior to beginning my study. These categories or factors were based on the literature on SLA and TCCL, for example; my experience of teaching PRC students; and the findings of my previous research projects. However, as I read and re-read the data, I was also on the lookout for unforeseen themes that might be in the diaries, interviews and autobiography. One such unexpected sub-theme gleaned from the diaries, for example, was boredom or demotivation due to the monotony of studying only English for over five 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.

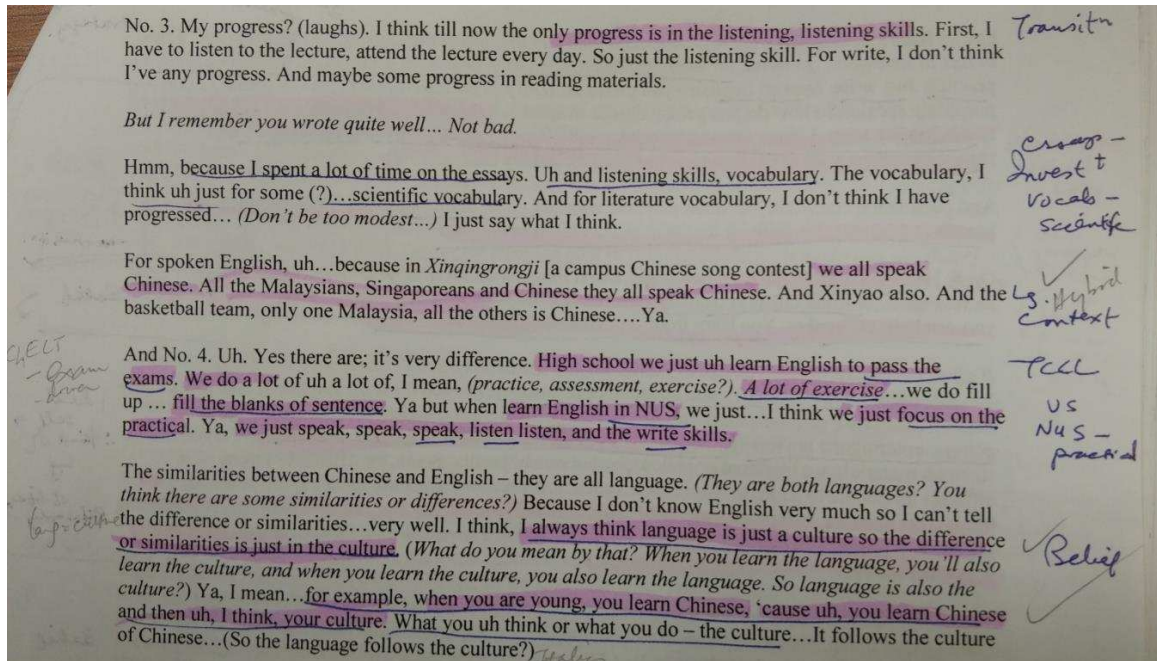
Looking for specific information on the analysis of data from diaries, I gathered that the answer depends on the purpose of the research. If the researcher does not have a clear perception of specific characteristics he or she is interested in, he or she can employ the grounded theory approach (Alaszewski, 2006, p. 86). However, if a researcher is using diaries to garner information on aspects of social reality external to the text, the approach involves some form of content analysis. In this case, if the researcher has a specific idea of what he or she is looking for or expects to find, then he or she can study the text to identify relevant characteristics. Since mine was the latter case, I examined the diaries as well as the other three sources of data for the a priori themes of TCCL, learning context, motivation, beliefs, strategies, affective dimension, identity, and transitions, based on my

review of literature and my experience in teaching and researching Chinese students. In addition, I looked out for other recurrent themes as I worked with the data.

Are there tools that can expedite the process of analysing, coding and synthesising the data? According to Alaszewski (2006), “[p]rior to the development of computer-based software, organizing text involved the physical manipulation of text...” (p. 95) but technology has developed tools to aid the researchers. In exploring possible aids to data analysis, I learnt of a variety of software, in particular, QSR NVivo 8. After experimenting with the software in NUS and also during my residential stays in UoN, I had to agree with Alaszewski (2006) that while such software 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” (2006, p. 97). Moreover, since analysis requires the exercise of judgement to identify themes and other types of information, I decided that I was more comfortable with doing the analysis manually as I had by then developed familiarity and closeness to the data through repeated reading, reflection, coding and summary-/note-making. I carried out a content analysis through “repeated perusal of the data” (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.

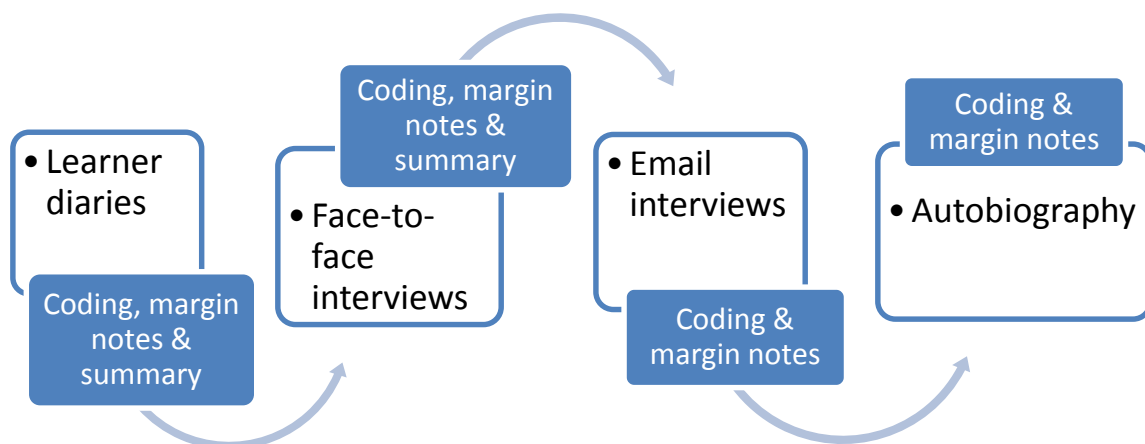
Having decided on analysing the data manually, I strived to be consistent and applied the same process to all four groups of data: the diaries, face-to-face interviews, email interview responses and the sole autobiography, working with hard copies printed from the electronic copies. A typical scenario of the process is as follows. As I was interested to study the participants’ learner characteristics and the transitions they made in their new L2 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 TCCL 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 or highlighted them and made notes in the margin or vicinity of

the instances. Figure 2.4 below illustrates my coding of the transcript of QC’s face-to-face interview. For example, I identified a remark that I perceived as relating to TCCL: “High school we just uh learn English to pass exams...” So I highlighted it and wrote “TCCL” in the margin. For a later response, “I always think language is just a culture so the difference or similarities is just in the culture”, I considered it as demonstrating belief and thus highlighted and coded it as “Belief” in the margin.



**Figure 2.4: Coding of Transcript of QC’s Face-to-face Interview**

These codes were revisited at least once for all the participants’ diaries, interview transcriptions, email responses and the autobiography for me to confirm the codes. The codes were also refined or changed where necessary during the second or third look (see Appendix C for examples of the coding of the summary of SQ’s diary entries, QU’s email interview and TC’s autobiography). The above analytical process is represented graphically in Figure 2.5 on the next page.



**Figure 2.5: Data Analysis Process**

### 2.5.2 Themes: From Ten to Seven

After the coding and analysis, the next step was to consolidate the significant findings from all four sources of data for all seven participants on a grid which I called the Themes Table (see Excerpt in Figure 2.6 on p. 101). By this stage, when it had been decided that the project would proceed as a multiple-case study, I focused on the seven participants to obtain a longitudinal view of their learner characteristics and transitions. The table was used to summarise the data for each focal participant under the a priori categories (based on my literature review, teaching and research experience) embedded in the diary prompts and interview questions as well as “unforeseen” themes that surfaced in the data. Altogether, 10 themes or categories were identified: motivation/L2 selves, beliefs, strategies, affective domain, NUS learning context, identity/agency/investment, TCCL, transitions boredom, and looking back. Under the columns headed by these 10 categories and in the rows devoted to each of the seven participants, I entered comments on learner characteristics and transitions as well as excerpts from the data as illustration. Each participant’s data were sub-divided into their early and late contributions: from the diaries and face-to-face interviews in 2006 (Stage 1) to their email interviews in 2010 (Stage 2). In the case of TC, data from his autobiography were included as well (see Appendix D for TC’s Autobiography). This fine distinction was necessary to understand the transitions

that the participants had undergone over nearly five years, and provided a way to view the early and later stages of their development. This approach also allows for a window to the topics the learners were interested in at the different stages.

The completion of the Themes Table provided a useful analytical tool for me. Each “participant row” provided a summary of a participant’s data. Each “theme column” with all seven participants’ data allowed the study of a particular theme in totality. However, because of its massiveness running into 11522 words, only an excerpt of the Themes Table can be included as Figure 2.6.

However, the 10 categories in the Themes Table were later collapsed into seven, namely, TCCL; NUS learning context; motivation/L2 selves; beliefs; strategies; affective domain; and identity, agency and investment; as a result of insights gained during the process of analysis, writing and revision. I found that this consolidation was necessary as some material included earlier had become superfluous and other sections needed more detail (Wolcott, 2001). For instance, there was an overlap between the findings under Transitions and Looking Back and the data included in other categories; data from these two themes were thus incorporated into the rest. Another category, Boredom, seemed initially a recurring theme in the diaries but subsequent re-reading indicated that boredom tended to be mentioned in relation to motivation; thus, I subsumed it under “Motivation”. I also developed a clearer view of the order in which to proceed. When writing up the findings on TCCL, I realised that this theme should be the starting point of my presentation as the learners came from the TCCL context to NUS. Did they exhibit the TCCL learner characteristics at the beginning depicted in the literature? Next, to answer the transitions aspect in Research Question 1 (RQ1), we need to know how NUS, their new L2 learning environment, had influenced their learning journeys. This influence and the resultant transitions could be gathered from the learners’ perceptions, actions and affect over time. Thus, the order of presenting the findings should proceed from TCCL to the NUS Learning Context, the macro of the participants’ sociocultural contexts, to the micro of the other themes: motivation/L2 selves; beliefs; strategies; affective domain; and identity, agency and investment.

Based on the above rationale, the findings on the seven themes will be presented in the following three chapters as follows:

Chapter 3: TCCL and NUS Learning Context

Chapter 4: Motivation, Beliefs and Strategies

Chapter 5: Affective Domain, Identity, Agency and Investment



| Theme & Std   | 1 Motivation/ Ideal / ought to L2 Self  | 2 Beliefs, e.g., effort for achievem   | 3 Strategies  | 4 Affective Domain   | 5 NUS Learning Context   | 6 Identity/ agency/ investment   | 7 Boredom  | 8 Looking back  | 9 TCCL, e.g., exams, vocab, gram   | 10 Transitions   |
|---------------|---|--|---|--|--|--|--|---|--|--|
| 4 QU<br>Diary | D: Mar 06 – Encouraged by teacher, she loved reading. Graduated from abridged ones to originals. Seemed integrative. Inspired by methods, teachers and enthusiasm of New Oriental School (NOS) in China. Provided for by parents who “happened to buy a computer” and who probably also bought the software for vocabulary learning. Apr - Wants Eng listening to be as good as for Chinese -Ideal L2 self. Inter- and intra-class debates caught her imagination: “challenging | D: Mar 06 – “Perhaps, I have to slow down...and pay more attention to the details. .... have to spend more time... try my best to persist.” “My first teacher told me that words are the bricks of the building of English language on my first Eng class.” She adopted this belief: “This vivid metaphor ... urged me to remember Eng words as many as possible.” Apr – Expressed belief that “debate is a very good exercise to improve both my Eng and critical thinking... challenging enough but worthwhile ... importance of team work.” | D: Mar 06 – She “commanded” herself to read regularly and challenged herself to read original books. She was taught various “effective methods” at NOS. Oral report – reflection on and evaluation of task demands. She made change based on principle of task purpose. To memorise and review words, she used computer software which advocated frequent review. Kept up habit in BC. Also read daily to “remember words”- Best way to remember meanings – use them in essays. Showed tendency for the affective | D: Mar 06 – success in reading, esp. Harry Potter (HP) books, made her happy and confident. At NOS, she was full of confidence due to the rapid progress in Eng, thus finding great fun...” Oral report – “some of us regard it as a torture...fear.” Using computer software “turned” her into “an even better student than those who had a headstart - Implied pride/ happiness. At mid-course, felt guilty and dispirited. “Such dilemma is not new to me. But it’s still useless in improving my attitude and methods.” Happy that she has | D: Mar 06 – Compared to NOS – “slow pace and ... tiny progress.” “Small class has its advantages, especially for practicing oral English... but there still can be some improvements.” Negative L2 experience because of perceived lack of advancement in Eng learning. Apr –Inter- and intra-debates caught the imagination of class: “our class has two heated debates.”; “All the debaters argued fluently and actively.” May – Sociolinguistic context frustrated her efforts to practise Eng – people often | D: Mar 06 – Agency and investment in time, effort and money in buying and reading HP books, and attending NOS. Oral report – “After pondering ... decided ... change on the content” - Investment of time and effort. Using computer software and reading daily on her own to remember words – investment and agency. Felt she had to take action or she might “waste the whole course.” Agency and investment; ought to self. Investment and agency in extending radio listening to CD listening. Mentioned “losing | D: Mar 06 – Nostalgia for NOS and boredom with BC: “I miss the NOS... I feel boring because of the slow pace of the BC and ... tiny progress in Eng.” At mid-course, felt guilty and dispirited because of lethargy and “lack of advancement” in Eng learning. | D: Mar 06 – Chose to tell me in entry 1 her love for reading starting in Grade 1 in China. Obviously, it’s important aspect to her. Nostalgic about NOS’s methods, pace, teachers, enthusiasm – “critical role in my learning Eng”. Oral report – led to recall of task in senior high school – to create a story from new words assigned by teacher – “challenged my Eng and creativity.” Using computer software –recall beginning of vocabulary learning in China. | D: Mar 06 – Concern for vocabulary - HP gave her “a lot of new words”; she “read very fast and neglected a lot of new words.” Critique of BC shows outspokenness not expected of TCCL learner - Among the most direct evaluation from diaries. Task to create a story from new words assigned by teacher – active and not typical of TCCL. Motivation and strategy to memorise and review words with effort -TCCL with techno twist - via computer software. Proactive stance to learning – not quite TCCL. Apr- Wants her | D; Mar - Oral report – She made change in strategy based on principle of task purpose. Developing flexibility. Apr - In debating skills, compared to high school experience: “I think I really have some progress compared to before.” May - A book she read led to recall of similar article on memory, then hypothesis and change in mindset after 4 months in the course: “now I know I have to change my thoughts.” Extending her strategies to practise Oral Eng. |

Figure 2.6: An Excerpt of the Themes Table



### 2.5.3 Themes, Sub-themes and Data Samples

In order to present the themes and sub-themes more clearly, I represent them in Table 2.5 below, together with 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 is not always possible to separate the parts from the whole without affecting the sense. For example, the following excerpt from QU’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> (QU\_D\_June2006).

The above quotation is identified by the participant’s pseudonym; the source of the data, in this case, the diary represented by the letter “D”; and the month and year when the diary entry was submitted. 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 marked by the participant’s pseudonym and “F\_November2006” as most of the seven participants attended the face-to-face interviews in late November of 2006 while those from the email interview will be labelled with the pseudonyms and “E\_July2010”. Quotations from TC’s autobiography will be denoted “TC\_A\_September2010”. This method of identification will be applied to all the quotations used in this thesis from this point onwards to provide a quick view of the source of the data and its place in the timeline of data collection.

| <b>The 7 Themes</b>  | <b>Sub-themes</b>                        | <b>Data Samples</b>  |
|----------------------|--|--|
| TCCL                 | Limited practice                         | “...we have few chance to speak” (SJW_F_November2006).   |
|                      | Transmission model of learning/ teaching | “Teachers just emphasize... the grammar part... they won’t do any change to their teaching style” (SCC_F_November2006).  |
|                      | Imitation model of learning/ teaching    | “... my English teacher asked us to recite every article from textbook...” (TC_D_February2006).  |
|                      | Exam-driven learning/ teaching           | “...English education in China is...aimed for exams” (TC_F_November2006).  |
|                      | 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” (QU_F_November2006).  |
|                      | Mastery of knowledge                     | “...we were supposed...to memorize everything the teacher assigned” (RYP_D_March2006).   |
|                      | Emphasis on texts                        | “She [his teacher] asked us to transcribe the text we had learned as homework” (QC_D_March2006).   |
|                      | Emphasis on grammar/vocabulary           | “...our emphasise just in learning new words, grammars...” (SJW_F_November2006).   |
|                      | Belief in effort for achievement         | “Reciting contributed greatly to my progress” (TC_D_February2006).   |
|                      | Passivity/Activity                       | “At that time, we are forced to learn from morning until night... We have no choice...” (SQ_D_April2006).<br>“...after I came to Singapore...I managed...by communicating with people in English” (SQ_D_February2006). |
| 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” (QC_F_November2006).   |
|                      | 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” (SQ_D_March2006).  |
|                      | UDP Curriculum                           | “I now listen in English, read in English, write in English. Except not speak in English” (SCC_F_November2006).  |

|                      |   |  |
|----------------------|---|--|
|                      | 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” (QU_E_July2010).  |
|                      | UDP FYP                                       | “My supervisor is German and I have to communicate with him in English. ...I said a lot and My English has improved naturally” (SJW_E_July2010).   |
|                      | UDP Community                                 | “...in hall...because the majority are locals and yup, you just have to speak English” (QU_F_November2006).  |
| Motivation/L2 selves | 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” (SCC_D_March2006).  |
|                      | 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” (TC_E_July2010). |
|                      | Motivated self                                | Ought-to Self: “‘Yiping, you should put more attention on your essays.’ Yes, I should” (RYP_D_April2006).  |
|                      | Loss of motivation                            | “Sometimes I feel very bored to learn English...I feel my brain is getting dull” (SJW_D_February2006).   |
| Beliefs              | Effort  | “I think I can get a good grade if I study hard enough” (SQ_F_November2006).   |
|                      | Vocabulary                                    | “I always have a notion that vocabulary is a must” (QU_F_November2006).  |
|                      | Grammar                                       | “I had got the viewpoint that grammar is not vital for English learning” (QC_D_March2006).   |
|                      | Language, communication and language learning | “Because English is a language, you have to use it. You cannot communicate with a computer” (RYP_F_November2006).  |
|                      | Context                                       | “Perhaps, it is partly because Singapore is not totally a English speaking country... my progress is very slow” (TC_D_March2006).  |
| Strategies           | Natural approach                              | “Learning is accumulated everyday with everyone” (RYP_E_July2010).   |
|                      | 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” (SQ_E_July2010).   |
|                                 | 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...”<br>(SJW_F_November2006).                       |
| Affective domain                | Happiness             | “During the past five years, I have improved a lot in English... I feel very happy and satisfied” (QU_E_July2010).  |
|                                 | Fear/unease           | “Now I feel a little disappointed and perplexed... I just don’t know what I’ve learnt today” (SJW_D_March2006).   |
|                                 | Confidence            | “The most important thing was that I began to build my confidence in English from that time” (SCC_D_March2006).   |
|                                 | 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” (TC_A_September2010). |
| Identity, agency and investment | Identity              | “As a lucky scholar, I am not care about exams, university and money” (RYP_D_May2006).  |
|                                 | Agency and investment | “I would like to decide what to learn and how to learn” (SQ_F_November2006).  |
|                                 | Empowerment           | “My internship... requires me to communicate with various vendors and contractors... After some time, I felt comfortable to... communicate with them freely” (QC_E_July2010).                 |

**Table 2.5 Themes, Sub-themes and Data Samples**

### **Chapter 3: TRADITIONAL CHINESE CULTURE OF LEARNING (TCCL) AND NUS LEARNING CONTEXT**

We come now to the findings from the analysis of the data gathered from the seven focal participants of this study. What learner characteristics and transitions did the analysis surface? In this chapter, we will examine how the learners were influenced by TCCL as well as their new L2 context in NUS, that is, the impact of the macro contexts, sociocultural, linguistic and academic, on the participants. From this bigger picture, we will later zoom in on the micro themes in the subsequent chapters.

#### **3.1 Traditional Chinese Culture of Learning (TCCL)**

The findings from the data presented two main strands of information on the Traditional Chinese Culture of Learning (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 firsthand. 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, 1997, 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)

### **3.1.1 Participants' Comments on TCCL**

In their diary entries and interview responses, the seven focal participants reflected on their learning context in China prior to joining the BC and in the process described certain TCCL characteristics. Between 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 TCCL firsthand. In the paragraphs below, the description of the TCCL characteristics are given 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 Chinese education was alluded to by all seven focal participants: SCC, SJW, RYP, QU, SQ, QC and TC. SCC even called it “a burden”. However, the harshest lines on the examination system leading to the Gaokao were etched by SQ 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! (SQ\_D\_April2006).

In this picture of an exam-driven culture, SQ also depicted the life of the learner who seemingly showed no autonomy, an oft-cited trait of the typical TCCL learner. And what is the effect on the learning of English in such a system? According to SQ, Chinese students lack practice because English is learnt as a subject – “it is like knowledge” – and seldom used after class. Hence, the mastery of knowledge is emphasised but, in fact, “...learning English well in ...China is not an easy thing” (SQ\_F\_November2006).

This difficulty of learning English well appeared to have also bothered QU. In her diary, she reflected on the emphasis placed on the mastery of knowledge, especially grammar and 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 (QU\_D\_June2006).

It appears then that the TCCL emphasis on grammar has an adverse effect. 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” (QU\_F\_November2006). 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 ELT classes.

The emphasis on grammar in ELT classes was also a theme in SCC’s face-to-face interview. He had this to say: “Teachers just emphasize... the grammar part...(Because the classes 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” (SCC\_F\_November2006). In the above response, SCC also highlighted a few other

TCCL characteristics: teacher as authority, the transmission teaching methods, 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.

In his interview response during the face-to-face interview, another learner, SJW, seemed to echo SCC 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" (SJW\_F\_November2006).

The characteristics of teacher as authority and the imitation model of learning were likewise highlighted by TC. During junior middle school, TC 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" (TC\_D\_February2006). The above 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, TC 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" (TC\_F\_November2006).

The themes of teacher as authority and the emphasis on vocabulary also surfaced in the diary of RYP 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" (RYP\_D\_March2006). 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” (RYP\_F\_November2006).

The mastery of knowledge and teacher as authority in TCCL were also themes in QC's diary and interviews. He detailed various learning methods prescribed by his teachers which included transcription and reading aloud, largely imitation models of learning (QC\_D\_March2006). In addition, he highlighted the micro issue of direct word-for-word translation and the macro issue of an exam-driven education system (fuelled by the goal of university admission). Like RYP, he concluded that though these students worked hard on exercises assigned by their teachers, they “never enter[ed] the door of learning English” (QC\_F\_November2006). This comment pointed to the TCCL trait of strong belief in effort for achievement but also implied criticism of Chinese ELT.

The above series of pictures painted by the students of their learning experiences in China do resemble the portrayal in the literature of the TCCL learning and teaching context: exam-driven teaching/learning; the lack of autonomy, and passivity on the part of learners; the transmission and imitation models of learning; the teacher as authority and model; emphasis on the mastery of knowledge, learning from texts, grammar and vocabulary; strong belief in effort for achievement; large classes and lack of individual practice. Thus, though China and the ELT scene have most probably been evolving over the past two decades, the influence of TCCL still seemed pervasive at least up till the mid-2000's when the seven participants were attending junior and senior middle school.

### **3.1.2 The Focal Participants as TCCL Learners**

The seven focal participants' reflections on the Chinese ELT context mostly converged and their comments indicated that TCCL as portrayed in the literature still had significant influence. However, whether the learners themselves were embodiments of the influence of TCCL is a separate issue. As the following discussion will indicate, the data do indicate commonalities among the participants particularly in three TCCL 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 student described in the literature. The participants thus exhibit both TCCL and non-TCCL characteristics; moreover, some of the non-TCCL characteristics appeared to have been present in the learners even before they left China.

### **3.1.2.1 The Importance of Vocabulary**

Vocabulary was never far from the mind of the focal participants. SJW 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” (SJW\_F\_November2006). In contrast to SJW’s regret about the BC, QC was elated that he “learned many vocabularies” during the BC (QC\_E\_July2010). The similarity between them was the significance of vocabulary in their belief system. RYP apparently shared the same belief about the importance of vocabulary when he lamented early in the BC: “My vocabulary is limited” (RYP\_D\_February2006). At the end of his degree programme, his concern with vocabulary surfaced again in his advice to an imaginary freshman: they should “always be ready to take long and strange words” (RYP\_E\_July2010). QU 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” (QU\_D\_February2006). 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” (QU\_E\_July2010). TC also revealed his concern with vocabulary when he evaluated the debates as providing an avenue to learn more: “I thought I can at least learn many vocabularies relating to the motions” (TC\_D\_April2006).

The two remaining participants, SCC and SQ did not only mention or imply that vocabulary learning was important for the learning of English but also emphasised the memorising of vocabulary. SCC reflected in his diary that he had “tried [his] best to

remember new words” since junior middle school. During the BC, he learned many new words “using half an hour in the morning to remember them” (SCC\_D\_May2006). However, he also stressed the need to use the words learnt in reading and writing, “rather than simple memorizing” (SCC\_E\_July2010). SQ 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” (SQ\_D\_May2006). She probably exemplified the Confucian scholar who practises “deep learning” as suggested by Biggs (1996) and Gu (2003). In the exit email interview, her emphasis was still on vocabulary expansion which was greatly helped by her UDP. Referring to her major of Quantitative Finance, she reflected: “It broadens my vocabulary, enriches the accuracy and contents of my expression” (SQ\_E\_July2010). In addition to SCC and SQ, QU 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 (QU\_F\_November2006).

### **3.1.2.2 Belief in Effort for Achievement**

QU 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 on her English learning journey. 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 (QU\_F\_November2006).

QU was not the only participant who was influenced by a strong belief in effort for achievement but she was probably the one who acted on it most consistently. SQ also maintained her emphasis on effort for mastery through repeated practice during the email interview when she commented thus: “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” (SQ\_E\_July2010). Besides indicating her transition from being an EFL to an ESL learner, this remark underlines SQ’s deeply entrenched belief and TCCL values. In her advice to an imaginary PRC freshman, she exhorted: “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” (SQ\_E\_July2010). Effort was paramount to achievement not only for QU and SQ; SCC too 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 for half an hour to one hour before class. By mid-BC course, he had “mastered most words for level-6 already, and started to do the same thing for TOEFL vocabulary” (SCC\_E\_July2010). Such dogged dedication is astounding and can only be the result of strong belief in the value of effort for attaining his ideal L2 self.

### **3.1.2.3 The Participants as Active Learners**

The above findings appear to confirm the plausibility of the “TCCL learner” as described in literature on Chinese ELT: 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 verbally passive learner depicted in literature on TCCL. We have seen in the above paragraph how QU, SQ and SCC determinedly push ahead in their learning journeys. The same was largely true of the other participants, SJW, RYP, QC and TC, though in varying degrees and less dramatic fashion. The following examples will illustrate the initiative they took to facilitate their English learning.

SJW read “a lot of novels” in the Self English Learning Facility (SELF) in CELC during the BC, “forced” himself to use English during his UDP, immersed himself in “the US educational culture” during his SEP and “said a lot” in English to his German supervisor for his Final Year Project (FYP) (SJW\_E\_July2010). RYP 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” (RYP\_F\_July2010). QC hardly reflected on 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” (QC\_D\_March2006). While in his UDP he interacted in English with international students who were fellow residents at his student hall and did the same with contractors and vendors during his internship programme (IP) (QC\_E\_July2010). As for TC, he was active in managing his learning, and was constantly in search of new learning strategies during the BC, for example, reading books, using the Internet and taking part in the 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 Student Exchange Programme (SEP) in the USA, 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 group members in the project (TC \_A\_September2010).

Thus, we see how all the focal participants are active learners who do not conform to the image of the passive TCCL learner lacking in autonomy. Before we end this section, we shall see that there is yet another way in which these students were not passive: they did not refrain from voicing their critique, whether of their curricula or of authority, when they deemed it fitting. I have quoted SCC’s views on the TCCL context in 3.1.1: he believed that because of the emphasis on exams Chinese teachers would not change their teaching style. Another critic of the Chinese ELT situation, RYP was candid in his

unhappiness with memorisation of vocabulary lists during his schooldays in China: “I do not like to learn this way” (RYP\_D\_March2006). During the BC, he was reluctant to accept the adverse evaluation of his essay even after his “tutor explained it again and again” (RYP\_D\_April2006). QC, 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 PRC students may work hard following the methods or modelling of their teachers but they “never enter the door of learning English” (QC\_F\_November2006). TC was uncharacteristically frank in his comments about 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” (TC\_F\_November2006). His analytical reflections on motivation and fossilisation in language learning also prove him to be far from passive (TC\_E\_July2010). It is possible that, like TC, 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 or to speak up in class, just as TC did during the debates.

I will underscore this finding on the active and proactive stance of the focal participants with the examples of the two most forthright learners. QU’s comments early in the BC shows an outspokenness not expected of TCCL learners, especially one newly arrived from China. Some of these comments, included in Diary 2, was a rather direct critique of the BC when she compared it unfavourably to the New Oriental School (NOS) which refers to “a famous English training school in China” where QU 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” (QU\_D\_February2006). Early in the BC too, SQ’s confident suggestion to improve the course was also quite unexpected: “I think another activity should be added is reading aloud or reciting” (SQ\_D\_March2006). She supported her suggestion with reasons based on her past L2 experience. In her last diary entry, she was quite frank in her dissatisfaction with the BC: “Our bridging course

is [...] is dragging on...becoming a routine. [...] We don't have such an important examination to drive us to study hard. [...] Idle life can make us confused” (SQ\_D\_May2006). Her evaluation remained unchanged in the exit email interview, as reflected in her advice to the fictitious junior:

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 (SQ\_E\_July2010).

Her critique of the BC was rather strong in this last comment, which was quite unlike the TCCL learner portrayed in the literature as 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 proactive approach they adopted towards their learning, the curriculum, and authority, was not in keeping with the portrait of the typically passive TCCL learner.

### **3.2 NUS Learning Context**

Having examined the TCCL context that the seven focal participants came 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 NUS. This new learning context can be divided neatly into two periods: pre- and post-matriculation. During the former, these learners were enrolled in CELC's Intensive English Course for PRC SM3 students under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Singapore. The course is often referred to as the Bridging Course (BC). After they had completed the BC, they matriculated as full-time NUS students, becoming also students in 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 journey of the seven focal participants can be further divided into the impact from the curriculum and the impact from the community. In the sections below, I present the findings of the influence of each segment of the NUS learning context on these participants and the transitions they made as a result.

### **3.2.1 Pre-matriculation: Bridging Course (BC)**

#### **3.2.1.1 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 four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In particular, 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 E: The Bridging Course.)

First, the participants saw purpose and value in the BC. In their exit email interviews, both SCC and TC commented on this aspect of the BC. For SCC, the purpose of the BC is to prepare students for academic life in an English medium university. Thus, he suggested that the BC urges learners to set and then work towards their own targets. As for TC, what he found most challenging in the BC was being motivated so as to take initiative and make the effort: "Just like what Confucius said, 'Teachers open the door, but you have to enter by yourself'" (TC \_E\_July2010). Thus, the BC had the value of motivating the students in their learning journey.

Additionally, the participants' developed greater competence and confidence in their listening, reading, speaking and writing skills through the activities and tasks of BC's curriculum. The most frequently reported improvements were in speaking. Students who



highlighted their enhanced speaking skills were RYP, QU and TC. RYP found the activities of the BC most helpful for him, especially the intra- and inter-class debates in April 2006; 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 (RYP\_F\_November2006).

QU had many chances to speak “in front of the whole class” for the weekly oral report; that was the most helpful activity for her as it built her confidence and courage (QU\_E\_July2010). She built on this foundation when the class had “two heated debates”, she being one of the debate team members. She reported that all the debaters “argued fluently and actively” (QU\_D\_April2006). TC contrasted the BC with the Chinese ELT context he left behind, and evaluated the BC as “more focused on oral English and there’s no big pressure from exams” (TC \_F\_November2006). He also found the activities most motivating and helpful, especially the debates, and reported that he felt “motivated to refute his opponent” (TC \_E\_July2010). Thus, the BC provided the opportunity for him to extend his strategies for speaking. Perhaps, the new learning context and the demands of the curriculum encouraged him to explore new avenues.

For QC, he found improvement in speaking and writing. 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 [...] it’s worth it” (QC\_F\_November2006). QC also found that the research project helped him made the crossing into authentic use of English while he found the oral report the most challenging task. He reported that his vocabulary had also expanded.

In terms of listening, two of the learners reported on definite improvement. SCC 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” (SCC\_D\_2006). SQ mentioned that listening was her greatest gain during the BC while oral report was her greatest challenge. BC provided the basis for her transition from EFL to ESL; it was easier to learn English well in NUS due to the opportunities for daily usage. Besides improvements in listening, writing and speaking skills, she learned more about western cultures (SQ\_F\_November2006). Thus, the BC also enhanced her integrative motivation.

Like the others, SJW found the activities, debates and learning journeys (excursions) useful. However, he highlighted reading as he was motivated to read by the autonomy offered by the Self-English Learning Facility (SELF) at CELC:

Yes, I think the most...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 (SJW\_F\_November2006).

With regard to the materials of the BC, SJW and SCC 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” (SJW\_F\_November2006). On the other hand, SCC 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...” (SCC\_F\_November2006).

Hence, it is probably safe to conclude that all the participants' English proficiency benefited from the BC, their first stop in the new NUS learning context though 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.

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 journey? The reflections and responses on these aspects were generally positive. SQ particularly relished her harmonious class atmosphere: "My bridging course is interesting, 21 youths seated together, discussing, chatting, laughing... and we cooperate with each other harmoniously" (SQ\_D\_March2006). As for the teacher-student relationship in the BC, the learners emphasised different aspects of this relationship. RYP's response was on teaching style and teacher expectations. He was "[t]aught in a nature [natural] style" such that he was "really learning and using a language" (RYP\_D\_2006). In the second half of the BC, he perceived that his tutors had higher expectations and thus the task demands were more difficult. QC saw the teachers as nurturers who encouraged them to speak with exhortations such as "don't be shy" (QC\_F\_November2006). TC also mentioned that the teachers encouraged the students to speak. "They speak to us in English and encourage conversation among students in English." (TC\_F\_November2006). SJW saw the teachers as advisors and facilitators: "... all my teachers are very helpful, especially, when we do the [research] project. My teacher has give us many advice and helped us to revise each, many times. Teachers are good" (SJW\_F\_November2006).

Thus, teachers in the BC were perceived as a help by these seven learners: teaching/leading by example, setting standards, encouraging, advising, guiding. This picture is in contrast to the one the participants painted of the TCCL classroom in the previous section. There, the teacher is the authority who, for instance, assigns vocabulary lists for memorisation, prescribes the learning methods of reciting/transcribing texts or emphasises 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 reports on some negative aspects of the learning context of the BC as perceived by QU and SQ. QU who had attended NOS,

compared the BC unfavourably to NOS. 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” (QU\_D\_February2006). Compared to her L2 experience in China, the BC had less emphasis on dictation and less rigour in reading practice. Thus, QU seemed to have some negative experience in the BC initially. SQ also seemed to lament the monotony of BC towards the end of the course. There was a sense of stagnation: “I just found I hadn’t learnt anything useful.” She felt BC was “dragging on” and routine; life was boring. There was no “clear goal” and no “important examination” as a driving force for SQ. Mental inertia had set in due to the lack of challenge: “Idle life can make us confused” (SQ\_D\_May2006). Thus, for these two learners, the transition was from a more demanding learning context in China to what they perceived as a less rigorous one in the BC. This transition was probably seen as a regression in their learning journey. Happily, they later appeared to have recovered from this initial culture shock and gave better reports of the NUS learning context. Towards the end of the BC, SQ found it “fun to make friends with so many lively words” and learning English became “a magic game” (SQ\_D\_May2006). However, it should be noted that the findings in this subsection are based on only two participants and may not be illustrative of the experiences of all the focal participants.

### **3.2.1.2 Community**

While the majority of their time during the first six months in Singapore and NUS was taken up by attending the BC five days a week, the PRC SM3 students did have the opportunity to interact with the larger NUS and Singapore communities. Broadly speaking, there were two responses to this opportunity, or perhaps the lack of it, depending on whose perspective.

On the one hand, SCC relished the NUS environment “because all around is English” (SCC\_F\_November2006). SQ also wrote with perceptible 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” (SQ\_D\_March2006).

On the other hand, QU reported that the sociolinguistic context 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!” (QU\_D\_May2006). She knew because people often replied her in Chinese. TC 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 (TC\_D\_March2006).

It was a challenge for QU and TC to speak English within the local community; they felt much hindered in their attempts. Thus, some of the participants experienced and benefited from the transition to an English-speaking community. On the other hand, others felt that they did not receive adequate support from the sociolinguistic environment and their transition into this environment was a problematic one. It should be pointed out, however, that only two of the participants made unfavourable comments about the community in their new learning context and, thus, their experiences might represent those of only a small group among Chinese learners.

### **3.2.2 Post-matriculation: Undergraduate Degree Programme (UDP)**

#### **3.2.2.1 Curriculum**

After they completed the BC in June 2006, the PRC scholars matriculated as NUS students in early August. For these freshmen, that was initiation to academic life in the university where students, under the tutelage of the faculty, regularly plunged into a very rigorous curriculum, completing an average of five modules in twelve to thirteen weeks each semester, followed by examinations. Along the way, readings, discussions,

seminars, presentations, lab(oratory) reports, essays, project reports, mid-term tests, etc. were required, culminating in the final examination papers, to ensure that the set standards had been met. Co-curricular activities under the auspices of the clubs, societies and student halls were also part of the overall experience of the NUS student. These activities will be discussed in the section for Community.

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 exams required of them, which were all conducted in English, their L2? How did they survive this second phase of their NUS L2 context? Happily, the data show that they fulfilled the requirements amply and, in fact, emerged from their four-year undergraduate degree programme (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 comments below.

Some of these comments were brief but nonetheless indicated the overall impact of the UDP on the participants. In his characteristically straightforward and terse manner, RYP wrote, “Lab reports, a lot” in response to the email interview question, “What did you find most helpful in your degree programme?” (RYP\_E\_July2010). As a Computational Biology major, completing the many laboratory reports he had to submit had provided regular practice for his written English. QC’s comment was almost as brief: “The writing skill and reading skill” (QC\_E\_July2010). Thus, the reading and writing they had to do in their UDP helped them improve their English skills.

Reading requirements in his UDP likewise provided the bridge to greater proficiency for TC. His passion in Physics provided the impetus for him to read in English.

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 (TC\_E\_July2010).

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” (TC\_E\_July2010). As we will learn in a later section, TC not only thought in English, but he also thought about English learning.

Besides RYP, another Computational Biology major, QU, also found the UDP context helpful in developing 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 later to qualify for a postgraduate degree programme. Beyond writing, QU found that her listening and speaking skills improved through regular interaction with lecturers, and local as well as international fellow students: “Forced to speak... so improved a lot” (QU\_F\_November2006). 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 (QU\_E\_July2010). So she could regularly practise her listening and speaking skills, in contrast to her experience of limited opportunities during the BC.

The improvement in speaking skills as a result of the UDP was highlighted by another student SJW 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 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 (SJW\_E\_July2010).

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, SJW 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” (SJW\_E\_July2010). 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 SJW to advance in his English learning journey.

An even more comprehensive improvement that included reading, writing, speaking and vocabulary skills was reported by SQ. 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 it involved much reading, writing and speaking (SQ\_E\_July2010).

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 SCC’s comments on this aspect. His responses to my questions (given in parentheses and italicised) during the face-to-face interview after one semester in his UDP 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 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 will be different?) Ya, would be totally different (SCC\_F\_November2006).



So it appears that the NUS L2 context had contributed to the English learning journey of SCC and his fellow PRC learners. They had taken ‘the road less travelled’ compared with their peers who remained in the Chinese universities and this had made all the difference. As reflected in their comments above, undergoing their UDP had helped the seven focal participants experience a positive transition in their English competence and confidence.

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

Like many globalised universities, NUS offers a Student Exchange Programme (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: QU, SJW and TC. All three happened to be Faculty of Science students. Besides SEP, NUS offers another programme that provides its students with learning experiences outside the university and that is the Internship Programme (IP). Students may apply to be attached to a company or organisation for usually one semester to gain industrial experience. QC, a Faculty of Engineering student, went on an internship. On the whole, the SEP and IP had a positive effect on these learners’ L2 learning experiences.

As she did for her UDP, QU 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” (QU\_E\_July2010). 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 QU’s readiness and sensitivity towards communicating in English.

SJW found his SEP experience a significant help to his English learning overall, 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 his elaboration, when prompted, the many glowing adjectives and emphasis he used indicated the impact of the SEP had 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] (SJW\_E\_July2010).

This experience appeared very helpful for SJW, 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 English learning.

TC's report of his SEP experience was painted in less rosy hues than SJW'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 TC'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 SJW, 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” (TC\_E\_July2010). However, it was not a lost cause, linguistically speaking, as he received helpful feedback that was quite similar to QU'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 (TC\_E\_July2010).

This analysis shows TC'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" (TC\_E\_July2010). To overcome his nervousness, he spent days rehearsing, which indicates remarkable motivation and metacognition. In his own way, TC developed greater sensitivity and motivation towards his English learning.

Let us turn now to QC 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 (QC\_E\_July2010).

The last word "freely" signifies much, given QC's initial diffidence in his new L2. He had experienced a transition in the process, becoming more confident in speaking English in authentic work situations. This was a long way from his early comment four years before: "I speak when I have to speak" (QC\_F\_November2006). Overall, all the focal participants who were involved in the SEP or IP, an important part of their UDP, benefited from their experience and developed greater skills, sensitivity and/or 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 often 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 postgraduate 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 SJW and TC referred to their FYP and their supervisor in the email interview answers. Interestingly, they were both Physics majors and both had German supervisors.

The FYP had a profound and positive effect on SJW'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" (SJW \_E\_July2010). On my probing, SJW 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 SJW 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 SJW's English learning, leading to his perception of improvement.

TC seemed also to have benefited from his FYP experience though it was not explicitly said. 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, 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 (TC\_E\_July2010).

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

### **3.2.2.2 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 co-curricular activities (CCAs). QU described the local students in her hall as preferring to speak English though 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: “...at 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” (QU\_F\_November2006). That experience appeared to have been affirming for QU and probably contributed to her English learning journey. 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 CCAs was QC. They provided him with another L2 context within NUS for interaction and communication, leading to

growth in his beliefs, confidence and competence. He “took up a lot of CCAs 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 student hall where there were “a lot of foreigners”. However, QC had a strong sense of Chinese cultural identity as revealed in his diary; thus, he also spent much time in CCAs where Chinese was the natural choice: “...because in Xinqingrongji [a campus Chinese song contest organised by students] we all speak Chinese. All the Malaysians, Singaporeans and Chinese they all speak Chinese” (QC\_F\_November2006). Thus, QC 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 four and a half years in NUS and experiencing its curriculum and community which together made up their whole 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, the participants had become more competent and confident as learners and users of English. Some, like TC and QU, had also developed greater sensitivity to the language and the nuances of accent and usage among other English speakers. The above summary is an overall view of their English learning journey through NUS which was arguably a successful one. Each had transited from being an EFL learner to an ESL one.

From the vantage point of how the participants transited through the macro contexts of TCCL and NUS (both BC and UDP), we will try to gain further insights in terms of their learner characteristics and transitions in motivation, beliefs, strategies, affective domain, identity, agency and investment, which will be discussed in the following two chapters.

## **Chapter 4: MOTIVATION, BELIEFS AND STRATEGIES**

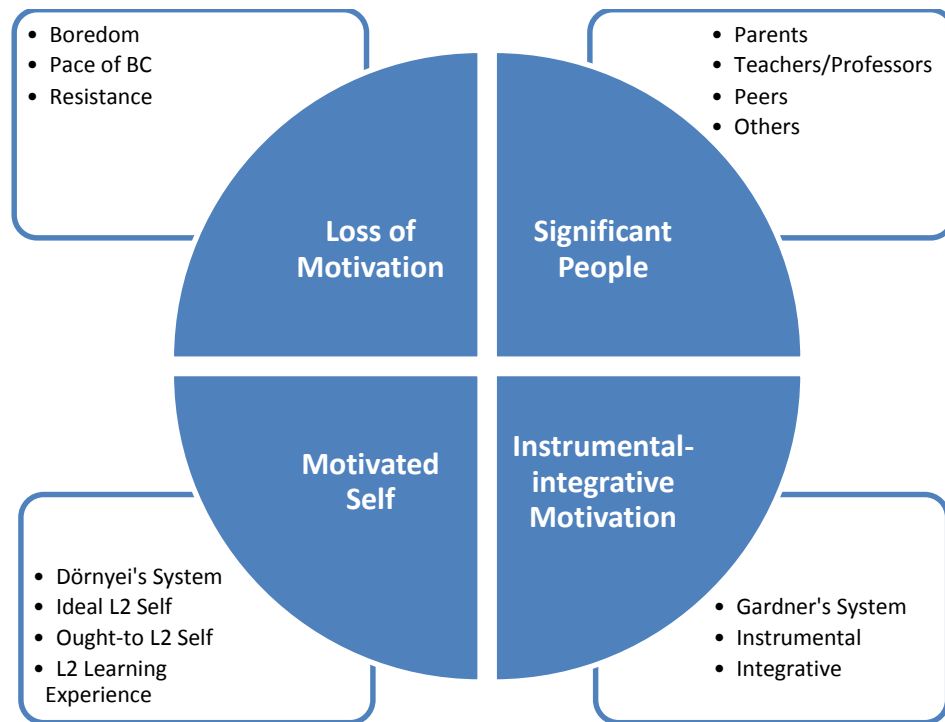
### **4.1 Motivation from a Multi-faceted Perspective**

The analysis of the data indicates that motivation in learning English is multi-faceted and complex for the seven case study participants. This seems, at first glance, surprising, given the relatively short history of these learners' English learning and the typical association of TCCL with instrumental motivation. However, on further reflection, the findings would seem logical, given the experiences of these students who have moved from an EFL context (when they only learned the language in class) to an ESL learning one (when they used it daily in class and in the community) during that short history. They were then no more students from a purely TCCL context.

Moreover, as we have already seen in the literature review, 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. As we shall see in the following sub-sections, their motivation saw changes as the learners moved through different stages of their learning journeys. Their motivation was one aspect of the transitions that the learners underwent as a result of studying in the learning context of NUS.

The analysis of these data yielded a multi-faceted perspective of the learners' motivation. To give us a more organised grasp of the different facets of motivation for these students, 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., 1972, 2001) and Dörnyei and his associates (e.g., 2001). 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 4.1. In the figure, it can be seen that the four salient distinctions in the participants'

motivation are further broken down into finer-grained aspects. The four major facets and the finer aspects will be discussed in the sub-sections following Figure 4.1.



**Figure 4.1: Motivation: A Multi-faceted Perspective**

### 4.1.1 Significant People

The analysis of the seven case studies shows that the influence of significant people on the participants' English learning was very important and even critical. In the initial part of their lives, either during childhood or early 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. The fact surfaced by the data is, invariably, that it was the learners' parents and their English language teachers who encouraged them to take the first steps or who decided their directions in the English learning journey.



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”. This insight is supported by Syed (2001) who found that that “social and familial expectations are an important consideration in influencing the motivation” of five heritage learners of Hindi. In their diaries and interviews, SCC, RYP, QU, QC and TC 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 PRC learners in their early motivation.

SCC’s mother believed that English would play an important role in the future world; he imbibed her belief and made an effort to improve his English after his dismal showing in primary school. Her beliefs resulted in her efforts to carve out a path for SCC’s English learning. She initially coached him herself and later engaged a competent tutor from “the best high school” in their city (SCC\_D\_March2006). 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” (SCC\_D\_March2006). In total, his growing motivation turned him from being a poor student of English during primary school to becoming among the best in junior middle school.

Another learner, QU 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 (QU\_D\_April2006). When she was proficient enough to read the original versions of bestsellers, she acquired the Harry Potter series (QU\_D\_February2006). QU also wrote about her English teachers who encouraged her to read, to listen to the radio, to expand her vocabulary (QU\_D\_March2006). She was particularly inspired by the enthusiasm and the methods of the teachers of New Oriental School (NOS), a famous private school chain, in Wuhan, China, where she attended extra-curricular English classes (QU\_D\_February2006). Again, parents and teachers were the significant others who launched QU’s early motivation.

TC 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. TC 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 English. He regularly followed Li’s advice to read English aloud till his mouth got “dry and exhausted”. In junior middle school, TC’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 (TC \_A\_September2006). The impact of significant adults appears to be formative for TC’s English learning journey.

To a less apparent degree, the “latent help” of RYP’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 (RYP\_D\_May2006). From the data, it can be surmised that this support from the significant adults in his life was available to RYP during the early years of his English learning.

As for QC, 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. QC found these teachers’ strategies helpful and his English improved through them (QC\_D\_March2006). Thus, he was motivated to continue learning through these methods even after he moved to upper classes.

Why do parents and teachers appear to have such a seemingly pervasive influence on Chinese students’ motivation towards English learning? One possible reason is Confucian philosophy on which Chinese cultural tradition is based. In the literature review, we have already seen how Chinese culture emphasises the hierarchical conceptions of relationships (Ni, 2008). The child should respect and obey his parents and teachers, while the latter authority figures exercise due benevolence for the welfare of their charge.

However, a second possibility is the close-knit parent-child relationship given the typical, extremely small nuclear family of modern China. This is how SCC 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" (SCC\_D\_May2006). Thus, some Chinese children may have a head start in motivation towards learning English due to one or both of these socio-cultural factors.

Shifting the focus to the NUS learning context, the participants mentioned other significant people who had impacted their motivation in the different phases during the four and a half years. First, it was their teachers in the Bridging Course (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 SM3 students, fellow undergraduates, exchange students in NUS, Final Year Project (FYP) teammates and SEP peers. One participant, QC, also mentioned the contractors and vendors in his Internship Programme (IP).

In their face-to-face interviews, both QC and TC acknowledged that the BC teachers played an important role in encouraging them to overcome their 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" (QC\_F\_November2006). They had to be motivated to make a start so as to build their confidence. TC recounted that BC teachers "speak to us in English and encourage conversation among students in English" (TC\_F\_November2006). 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: "I got the feedback that my accent went well with Singaporean but not Americans." (TC\_E\_July2010). 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." (TC\_A\_September2010). This extended to his motivation to choose a German supervisor

for his FYP and speak only in English to his FYP teammates. As for QC, he reflected in the face-to-face interview that “language is just an interaction between people so you can help each other” (QC\_F\_November2006). He applied this particularly during his UDP when he played basketball with the many 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” (QC\_E\_July2010).

Another learner who was “forced to speak” English during the UDP was QU. She described a seminar-style module called Doing Science, during the face-to-face interview, where she had to engage with a group of five to ten people, including mentors and students. In order 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 (QU\_F\_November2006). 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” (QU\_E\_July2010).

SJW 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” (SJW\_D\_February2006). During his SEP at the University of California, he revealed in his email interview that 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” (SJW\_E\_July2010).

Similarly, SQ found interaction with others in her new learning context in NUS, starting from the BC, motivating and inspiring. Writing in her diary, she recounted her joy in being able to communicate with total strangers in English to get a page printed. She also

delighted in 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” (SQ\_D\_March2006). This motivation encouraged by social interaction also surfaced in the email interview when she advised the imaginary freshmen to “make more friends. The friendship developed in this period is really precious and helpful” (SQ\_E\_July2010). She probably felt helped and motivated by her interaction with friends.

In also giving advice to an imaginary junior in the exit email interview, SCC advocated, “...try to communicate more with professors and students after class” (SCC\_E\_July2010). It was probable that he too had found this interaction motivating for himself. As for the last participant, RYP, 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” (RYP\_E\_July2010). 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 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 in all the data. Thus, different significant people made important contributions to the motivation of these PRC learners at different stages of their lives. This finding on significant others has implications for the BC teacher and will be discussed further in the Chapter 6.

#### **4.1.2 Instrumental-Integrative Motivation**

Beginning with my Diploma-in-Education teacher training, I had envisaged 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. Due to my familiarity with this interpretation of motivation, I adopted this approach to analyse data in my earlier research, including a diary study of PRC students (Fong, 2006b). Similarly, during the first phase of data gathering for the present study, via the diary and face-to-face interview, the learners’ motivation was examined on whether it was instrumental or integrative, or both. Though there have been 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 was expressed in utilitarian and affective or relational terms.

The usefulness of Gardner’s concept becomes apparent when we remember that the learners were actually studying and living in an ESL learning situation, in NUS and in Singapore. 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, all of the seven participants exhibited instrumental motivation.

English was important for their education and future career. It was a useful “tool” as mentioned by some of the learners. However, some of the participants 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 though most of them still retained their instrumental motivation. Over the course of four and a half years, 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 TC who responded most extensively on motivation, giving us the fullest reflection on the theme among the seven focal participants. His case also exemplifies a learner who retained a mainly instrumental motivation despite some small adaptations during his learning journey. TC’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, including participation in the inter- and intra-class debates when he felt “forced to learn, forced to practise, more motivated to” (TC \_F\_November2006). However, he also approached them with enthusiasm: “I am quite excited.” (TC \_D\_April2006). 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” (TC\_D\_March2006).

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 met 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” (TC \_F\_November2006). As he began his UDP, and was initiated into the scientific 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, TC 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” (TC \_E\_July2010).

The SEP seemed to have been a watershed in TC’s learning experience and his 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 (TC \_E\_July2010).

In the above reflection, TC seemed to have hypothesised 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 TC’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 (TC \_A\_September2006).

We may observe that the above description gave little hint of a more integrative engagement with this community. Interestingly, TC reflected deeply on motivation; he mentioned motivation three times in the email interview including “[d]eep motivation to learn” in answer to Question 3, “Can you describe some significant experiences / people



during this journey?” He concluded that it is motivation that makes the difference in how well one learns and supported his view 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. (TC \_E\_July2010).

For TC 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 TC to integrate with the community around him. Coupled with his goal-oriented approach, it may not be surprising that his motivation had remained largely instrumental.

Another participant who seemed predominantly instrumental in his motivation during his learning journey might have been RYP. 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, RYP revealed that he preferred to watch movies and play computer games in their “original language”, that is English (RYP \_F\_November2006). This could be viewed as a kind of integration in specialist communities but RYP’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” (RYP\_E\_July2010). It appears that his motivation was still mainly instrumental though a slightly more integrative dimension may be argued from his ease with using English in his “daily life”.

Like RYP, there was an inkling of the integrative for QC though he appeared to have also remained mainly instrumental in his motivation. Among the seven learners, QC seemed the least driven in terms of need for achievement; his motivation depended on whether he was “interested in the topic” (QC\_D\_March2006). 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” (QC\_D\_March 2006). 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, QC 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” (QC\_F\_November2006). In the exit email interview at the end of QC’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 (QC\_E\_July2010).

In the data he supplied, SCC revealed a mixture of instrumental and integrative motivation, with the latter somewhat more pronounced than what was displayed by the RYP and QC. He seemed to have begun with a strong instrumental orientation. As described in the sub-section above on Significant People, he was influenced by his mother’s belief. This was revealed in his diary entry: “English will play an important part in future world and it will be a fundamental tool in my future study.” (SCC\_D\_March2006). 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” (SCC\_D\_May2006). 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” (SCC\_F\_November2006). In his email interview, SCC

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 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” (SCC\_E\_July2010). Again, the idea of English as a tool surfaced. 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 SCC’s motivation despite the strong instrumental motivation.

Different from the four learners described above, QU displayed both instrumental and integrative leanings early in her first year in NUS. For instance, QU loved reading unabridged versions of the Harry Potter series even while she was in China though 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.”

(QU\_D\_February\_2006). On the one hand, she read to expand her vocabulary; on the other, she found pleasure. The instrumental appeared to have the upper hand in the UDP, however. While still a freshman, QU mentioned in the face-to-face interview that she was preparing herself to take the TOEFL and GRE tests so as to fulfil her dream of becoming a research scientist. To be ready for modules that required essay type assignments, she planned to use her first university vacation to improve her English

(QU\_F\_November2006). 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, QU reflected that she needed to use English for many “reports and essays” as well as “projects and lab meetings”. 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

(QU\_E\_July2010). Thus, QU was a learner who exhibited both instrumental and integrative orientations in her motivation.

A combination of instrumental and integrative was probably also present in SQ's motivation from the start of the BC. In her first diary entry, SQ's revealed her desire to learn by living including talking to strangers in order to accomplish real tasks. She also found the BC and studying with her friends "enjoyable" (SQ\_D\_March2006). 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 in the face-to-face interview: "I enjoy learning English. It is very efficient language [...] English is very direct, ya. I like English." (SQ\_F\_November2006). Together with her mention in the exit email interview of her growing acquaintance with western cultures since the BC ("I learned more about western cultures"), it appears that the integrative orientation had become more pronounced in SQ's case (SQ\_E\_July2010). She had possibly moved towards a more integrative motivation through her years in NUS. Thus, SQ was a learner who had transited to a more integrative motivation during her learning journey in her new learning context.

I will end this sub-section with SJW whose motivation appeared to have experienced many twists and turns. SJW'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", "good" were used repeatedly to evaluate the experience. SJW also mentioned that he went from "embarrassment", to "more brave" (SJW\_D\_February2006). Thus, though 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 sixth and 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." (SJW\_D\_May2006). 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, SJW again mentioned the affective dimension: “I like this kind of study” and “began to like this English course” (SJW \_D\_May2006). It is possible that this affirming learning experience can indicate or lead to a more integrative orientation.

However, in the face-to-face interview during the first year of his UDP, SJW 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 in trouble.” (SJW \_F\_November2006). This strongly instrumental orientation appeared to be a steady element in SJW’s worldview as reflected four years later 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 the GRE and TOEFL; the latter preparation would be “useful” for study and career (SJW \_E\_July2010). It appears then that SJW displayed a strong leant towards the instrumental in his motivation during his UDP.

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

...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. [...] 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 (SJW \_E\_July2010).

This possible integrative motivation was reinforced probably after he returned to NUS. During his FYP, SJW 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” (SJW \_E\_July2010). Thus, SJW’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 English learning 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 that community or world that they wished to integrate into, be it cultural, literary, virtual, or scientific. In the Discussion chapter, I will explore how this transition could have grown from the ti-yong dichotomy in the Chinese cultural-educational landscape and suggest how BC teachers could help learners in their transitions from a more instrumental orientation to a more integrative one. 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).

#### **4.1.3 The Motivated Self**

While PRC learners in this study appeared to be influenced by the significant people in their lives, particularly in the early stages of their English learning, they themselves also shaped the growth and direction of their motivation. The data indicate that the students themselves were very much involved in their English learning, conscious and proactive in their choices and actions. Because of this facet of 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, the experience of success.

Filtering the data through this lens of Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, it appears that the Ought-to L2 Self surfaced early in the diaries and face-to-face interviews as the learners' adjusted to their new learning context. In their first year in NUS, the participants showed concern that they fulfilled expectations and avoided failure in the BC and the UDP. As I have quoted the learners extensively in the preceding sub-section on Instrumental-integrative Motivation, it is probably not necessary to repeat the quotations from the data in this sub-section. Instead, wherever useful, I will paraphrase and summarise their diary reflections and interview responses.

In their first year in NUS, in 2006, SCC explicitly mentioned that he was careful not to fall behind others in his English learning during the BC and thus he worked hard at memorising and using new vocabulary. During the BC too, RYP was concerned to find solutions to overcome his problems with giving oral reports and writing essays. SQ also reflected on and monitored her writing and speaking during the BC so as to avoid pitfalls she had identified. At one point in the BC too, QC perceived his spoken English was weaker relative to his written English, and decided to seize every possible opportunity for practice. Writing also in his diary, TC felt that his progress was very slow at the halfway mark of the BC. Towards the end of the BC, he wrote about his severe shock when he received an "E" grade for a progress test. QU also lamented her "tiny progress in English" during the BC. In the first semester of her UDP, QU 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. SJW 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 for all the learners who tried “to meet expectations and avoid undesirable outcomes” (Dörnyei, 2010).

These probable early signs of the Ought-to L2 Self as indicated above 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 QU, she not only aspired to speak English, but she also desired to speak it in a native-like fashion, as expressed in her diary during the BC. To listen and speak like a native speaker, she was willing to make much effort, for example, her experiment with “One-breath” English (QU\_D\_May2006). In her freshman year, she was planning to take the GRE and TOEFL to prepare for postgraduate studies in order to become a research scientist (QU\_F\_November2006). All this affords a glimpse of QU’s Ideal L2 Self where English would play a major role in her future life. Another learner who manifested signs of an Ideal L2 self was TC 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” (TC\_E\_July2010).

For SCC, he was interested in using English to “touch new knowledge, new informations, in the world” as well as “many interesting things” (SCC\_F\_November2006). 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 the TOEFL and GRE in preparation for his future studies (SCC\_E\_July2010). In comparison, SQ’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 RYP, the realisation that presentations skills in English were needed in his UDP made him willing to work hard on his oral reports during the BC. His Ideal L2 Self then included the ability to speak confidently in public (RYP\_D\_March2006).



Interestingly, some participants also mentioned their aspirations and ideals in other areas instead. SJW revealed that he very much admired Kaifu Lee, then “the technological manager” of Google. Most probably, Lee was the “very successful person” that SJW aspired to become (SJW\_D\_April2006). However, his admiration centred on Lee’s philosophy of courage and wisdom in life rather than his achievement in English. For SQ, in the last month of the BC, she felt that the course was “dragging on”. To overcome this feeling, she reflected in her diary: “To live a happy and meaningful life, we need some challenges” (SQ\_D\_May2006). This reflection hints at the Ideal Self for SQ, 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 final year in NUS and beyond. This was gleaned from the data found in the exit email interview. By the time of QU’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: “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” (QU\_E\_July2010). SQ felt she was past the half-way mark to her target as she could use English “freely in writing and speaking format” though she still had “a lot to learn.” (SQ\_E\_July2010). 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 SCC, his Ideal L2 Self could only be surmised from a metaphor he used to say where he was in his learning journey: “English is already a tool in my hand, but not an instinct from my mind” (SCC\_E\_July2010). Perhaps, he was looking forward to the future when he could use English instinctively, much like a native user. For RYP, his latter Ideal L2 Self still seemed modest: to be able to write more professionally (RYP\_E\_July2010). At graduation, QC felt that he had “quite a lot to learn” as he was still “far away from the destination” (QC\_E\_July2010). The remark, however, indicates the possible development of an Ideal L2 Self for QC, which did not seem to be present in the early data. For TC, 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 (TC\_E\_July2010). In the process of renting a room, he reflected in his autobiography 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.'" (TC\_A\_September2010). Thus, TC's ideal L2 Self had a distinctively American accent. How the above learners envisaged their Ideal L2 Self appeared crucial for the development of their motivation in learning English. Each participant's Ideal L2 Self probably became the goal they strived to attain, a beacon light that guided the path for their learning journey.

Interestingly, SJW 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 the GRE and TOEFL tests to train not only their English skills, but also their logic and perseverance. In all, each should become "knowledgeable and a better person" (SJW\_E\_July2010). This ideal, however, may 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 "immediate learning environment and experience, such as, the impact of the teacher, the curriculum, the peer group, the experience of success" within the meaning of "L2 Learning Experience". Because we have already discussed the findings on all these aspects in detail under the previous section, NUS Learning Context, we will be brief here. The following paragraphs are aimed at giving the reader an overview and reminder of the impact the L2 Learning Experience had on the motivation of the seven participants.

Some of the learners found the NUS environment itself to be nurturing. SCC 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" (SCC\_F\_November2006). SQ 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” (SQ\_D\_March2006). Moreover, she was motivated by her congenial SM3 class and the progress she was making in the BC. It was a pleasure for her to be learning “harmoniously” among twenty one youths, and it made her proud to realise that she was using her “secondary language freely” (SQ\_D\_March2006).

On the other hand, the curriculum and community of NUS was also motivating for the learners. The many aspects of BC compelled RYP, QU, TC, SJW and QC 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, RYP overcame his fear of public speaking and even enjoyed the task (RYP\_D\_March2006). QU found the effort for the debates “challenging enough but worthwhile” (QU\_D\_April2006). Likewise, TC reported that the debates “forced” him “to learn and to practice, more motivated to” (TC\_F\_November2006). SJW found the research project “rather interesting and challenging”, such that he learnt many “meaningful and invaluable things” through the experience (SJW\_D\_May2006). QC evaluated the essay component and found it “quite useful’ and worthwhile; he had “spent a lot of time on it” (QC\_F\_November2006). Moreover, in their diaries and face-to-face interviews, QC and TC 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 to the UDP curriculum. These 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 Final Year Project (FYP) were required for the fulfillment of their UDP. Thus, we can envisage that, generally, 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 QU, TC, SJW and QC. Perhaps QU’s

response in the email interview may be a representative summary of most of the learners' UDP 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 (QU\_E\_July2010).

QU alluded to speaking every day, indicating the interaction opportunities that she and the other participants had with their 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 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 purely Ought-to L2 Self expected of bright and conscientious scholarship holders to a greater apprehension of and investment in their individual Ideal L2 Self with all the attendant goals and aspirations. This was an incremental transition for the seven learners, one which helped to propel them further along their English learning journeys.

#### **4.1.4 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 five and a half months without any dip. It will be instructive for teachers and curriculum planners to be acquainted with the likely causes of students' loss of motivation. The knowledge

might help to pre-empt or repair demotivation, especially where the contributory causes could be regulated or controlled.

Four of the case studies participants, SJW, RYP, QU, and SQ, reported some loss in motivation during the BC while one participant, QC, recalled a similar experience during his high school days in China. The remaining two, SCC and TC, 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 the fifth participant, QC, 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, SJW 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” (SJW\_D\_February2006). RYP reflected similar sentiments but only towards the end of the bridging course:

However, after several months 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 (RYP\_D\_May2006).

The pace of the BC in comparison to the students’ previous L2 experience was also a contributory factor to demotivation. At mid-course, QU’s nostalgia for the New Oriental School and her disappointment with the pace of the BC caused her to feel 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” (QU\_D\_February2006). Towards the end of the BC, another learner, SQ, also felt “very tired” as the BC was “dragging on ... becoming a routine.” Her loss in motivation was aggravated by the lack of a concrete goal such as a major exam: “We don’t want to study hard, because we don’t have clear goal. We have no motive and don’t know exactly what we should do ... don’t have such an important examination to drive us to study hard” (SQ\_D\_May2006).

It is apparent from the data that the L2 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 had undergone. 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 of my former PRC students.

For QC, we learn that he lost the motivation to learn English in his previous L2 experience because his senior middle school teacher, Mrs Z, emphasised grammar. Since he thought that “grammar is not vital for English learning”, he resisted learning in Mrs Zhu’s 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” after three years of senior middle school (QC\_D\_March2006).

However, all is not lost when learners exhibit a loss of motivation. SJW, RYP, QU, and SQ 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 during their UDP. What could be possible reasons for the recovery? From my experience of working with PRC scholars, most probably, the causes for recovery had to do with these young learners’ motivation to succeed. As discussed earlier in this section, whether viewed through the lens of Instrumental-Integrative Motivation or L2 Motivational Self System, these learners were highly motivated individuals. They were conscious of the need to fulfil the requirements of their UDP coursework and FYP. QC, TC, QU and SJW were also inspired by their respective IP and SEP experiences. We may also surmise that their on-going relationships with the significant others in their lives continued to encourage them. Thus, after the

transient periods of discouragement, the participants regained their motivation and continued with their English learning journey.

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 20 students who took French as L2 at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. Using a qualitative research approach, she examined, among other things, "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 detour by using affective or metacognitive strategies. For instance, RYP 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 (RYP\_D\_ May2006).

Thus, in this section on the theme of motivation, the overall findings on these seven PRC learners suggest that they embarked on their English learning journey as (pre-)adolescents

through the direction and guidance of significant people in their family or in their early L2 contexts. 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 further develop the motivation. This motivation was mainly instrumental at the beginning of the BC, but being immersed in the new L2 context of NUS and the Singapore community, the participants began to display gradual but perceptible growth in their integrative orientation. Coming to the end of their UDP and in their exit email interviews, they showed apparent transitions to a more integrative motivation after four and a half years in an ESL context. In their motivation, even despite temporary periods of discouragement, these learners showed themselves to be extremely active and admirably determined. They were certainly not the typical, passive TCCL student presented in the literature (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998).

## **4.2 Beliefs**

Examining the “Beliefs” column of the themes table for commonalities among the seven focal participants, I found that four sub-themes of this learner characteristic stood out, namely, Effort, Vocabulary, Grammar and Nature of language, communication and learning. There is also a lesser category that merits some mention, the L2 context. It is significant to note that the beliefs of these learners appeared to undergo some transition in the course of their sojourn in NUS. These changes will become clearer as we discuss the sub-themes in the sub-sections below.

### **4.2.1 Effort**

All of the seven focal participants referred to their effort in their English learning journey in the data, especially in their first year in NUS. In their diaries and the face-to-face interviews, the learners indicated their belief that effort is important for learning English well. SCC, who hardly mentioned effort directly in the diaries, conceded 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 our teachers are very good”



(SCC\_F\_November2006). 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 IELTS, CET4 and TOEFL while he was in senior middle school in China (SCC\_D\_May2006). Each morning during the BC, he also memorised ten pages of vocabulary from dictionaries (SCC\_E\_July2010).

QU, 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 (QU\_F\_November2006).

Another firm believer in the need for effort in English learning, SQ assessed her progress this way: "I think I can get a good grade if I study hard enough." (SQ\_F\_November2006). These two learners seemed also to attribute this belief in effort to TCCL. During the same interview, QU mentioned that it is in Chinese culture to work hard at language learning to achieve success while SQ expressed the perception that Chinese students "are more diligent", and used to hard work "to get [into] a relatively good university" (SQ\_F\_November2006). Their attribution to Chinese cultural characteristics is in keeping with the literature on TCCL (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998, p.102; Rao, 2005, p. 54).

The participants' belief in the need for effort led to investments that were almost always made with an eye to the future and the long haul. TC wrote in his diary that he had "to spend more time and effort, as language learning is a long [emphasis added] process" (TC\_D\_March2006). SJW 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" (SJW\_D\_March2006). RYP, reflected in his that he should pay "more attention" on his essays after he was admonished by a BC

teacher to do better than the D grade he received for one assignment (RYP\_D\_April2006). QC, 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” (QC\_D\_March2006).

However, by the end of their NUS career, the students seemed to say relatively less about effort. True, in the email interview responses, some, like SJW and SQ, still advised their imaginary juniors from China to be disciplined, to set goals and to work hard to achieve these goals. But the rest seemed to have other overarching concerns. SCC was concerned about becoming as conversant in English as he is in Chinese so that English can be “an instinct” from his mind (SCC\_E\_July2010). QU and QC focused on the nature of communication so that the ability and the courage to speak intelligible English should override the scruples about accurate grammar. According to QC, “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.” (QC\_E\_July2010). TC 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.” (TC\_E\_July2010).

The above development may reflect the fact that, the four to five years spent living and studying in a new L2 context had made an impact on these learners in terms of the strength of their belief about effort. Effort is still important, it seemed, 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 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 Discussions.

#### 4.2.2 Vocabulary

Vocabulary learning was seen as another tenet of TCCL in the literature; PRC learners were socialised into the mindset that words are key to the whole language learning process. This became apparent early in my contact with SM3 and SM2 students who often asked me at the beginning of the BC for word lists to learn from. They also jotted new vocabulary learnt into dedicated notebooks which they consulted when they wrote their essays. Some were observed to be learning the jotted words “by heart”.

Let us begin with QU and SCC who mentioned vocabulary extensively in their diaries and interviews. QU is an example of early socialisation into the TCCL conceptualization of vocabulary. She related in her diary the “vivid metaphor” which her teacher used. “My first teacher told me that words are the bricks of the building of English language on my first English class.” In turn, she adopted this belief: “This vivid metaphor ... urged me to remember English words as many as possible” (QU\_D\_March2006). For QU, vocabulary was the supreme concern, her early mindset being reinforced and conditioned by the exam-oriented 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” (QU\_F\_November2006).

SCC 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 have “to read as much as possible and catch up with the trend of the world” and this means “Chinese need to learn more English words [emphasis added] to do so” (SCC\_D\_April2006). He conceded, however, that mastery of words was only possible after long, repeated practice. Hence, for students like SCC, 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 or marginalisation.

And how does a PRC learner “remember” lists of words? TC, among others, revealed that regular review of learnt vocabulary was necessary and so was reciting the words. However, he was not content with just learning vocabulary per se; it should become “live vocabulary” which he could use readily in everyday life (TC\_D\_April2006). SQ 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” (SQ\_D\_May2006). However, not all the seven learners liked learning by memorising and reviewing. Though SJW asserted that learning vocabulary was 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 (SJW\_F\_November2006). Another “dissenter” was RYP 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” (RYP\_D\_March2006).

However, the strength of the concern for vocabulary seemed to have become less tenacious with time. In the participants’ responses to the email interview, belief in the importance of vocabulary learning was hardly mentioned. It seems to have paled in significance compared to other concerns that surfaced during this period of their learning journey. One reason could be that they had already learnt how to learn vocabulary so that it did not worry them anymore. Another possibility was perhaps the development of a different mindset: vocabulary is not the most crucial measure of language mastery. We will discuss more of this transition in the belief on vocabulary learning in the sub-section on the nature of language learning and communication below.

### **4.2.3 Grammar**

The issue of grammar surfaced in the data given by some of the participants in their diaries and interviews. Interestingly, there seemed to be varying beliefs about the importance of grammar for English learning. To begin with, grammar appeared to be inextricably linked to the exam system in some participants’ minds. In describing the

Chinese ELT situation during the face-to-face interview, SJW alluded to the emphasis on grammar in connection with exams: "...in our high school, our emphasise just in learning new words, grammars and to pass the exam" (SJW\_F\_November2006). SCC expressed similar sentiments: "...teacher just emphasize on the grammar part and...the exam is a burden on the high school students" (SCC\_F\_November2006). However, personally, these two learners did not seem to think that grammar was crucial for learning English at that point in their journey. In fact, SCC stated it explicitly: "In comparison [to vocabulary], grammar is not so important because if grammar is not built on words, grammar will be useless" (SCC\_F\_November2006).

Without referring to exams like SJW and SCC, QC 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 school days. This belief caused him to stop paying attention to his English teacher, Mrs Z, who "attached importance to grammar" during the three years he was in her class (QC\_D\_March2006). Another learner, RYP revealed his belief that English learning must go beyond grammar in the face-to-face interview. Referring to the ELT context in China, 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 uh listen" (RYP\_F\_November2006). So these two learners too did not seem to think that mastering grammar was crucial for mastering English.

In contrast, QU reflected quite extensively on grammar in her diaries written in the BC. She believed that "Chinese students are known to be good at grammar." She herself found "grammar quite useful at the outset of learning a new language" and had "been reading many grammar books and doing many related exercises". Thus, when she found that the BC did not focus on grammar, she "felt quite unnatural and strange". But she was also perceptive about problems with Chinese ELT's emphasis on grammar: "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" (QU\_D\_June2006).

In the above description, we see two contrasting sets of beliefs about the role of grammar. Strangely, QC and QU, with their divergent initial beliefs about grammar, came to the same conclusion about its role by the time they graduated from their UDP. In her email interview advice to her juniors, she advocated 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 (QU\_E\_July2010).

For QC, 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” (QC\_E\_July2010). Thus, it appears that the fear of making grammatical mistakes which silences many Chinese learners had become less of a hindrance for these two learners at least. It was a huge transition for QU and QC as they seemed liberated from the tyranny of the need for grammatical perfection. The other participants did not mention grammar in the email interview. It is very possible that grammar had also become a non-issue for them by then. Thus, their perceptions about grammar had also changed during their time in NUS.

#### **4.2.4 Nature of Language, Communication and Language Learning**

Over the course of the four and a half years they spent in NUS, the Chinese learners 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 L2 learning context also reshaped the beliefs of some of the participants.

Some of the participants believed in learning language through authentic communication. RYP advocated real, everyday use of English in interpersonal interaction: “Because

English is a language, you have to use it. You cannot communicate with a computer” (RYP\_F\_November2006). He held this belief till the time of his graduation for he responded in the email interview thus: “Learning is accumulated everyday with everyone” (RYP\_E\_July2010). Similar to RYP in his belief about “natural” language learning and communication is QC: “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” (QC\_F\_November2006). 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” (QC\_E\_July2010).

SQ also saw language as a tool for communication and, thus, one can “learn by living.” However, her perspective was more academic than RYP and QC’s 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” (SQ\_D\_March 2006). Moreover, she perceived the different language skills as being inter-connected. 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” (SQ\_D\_March 2006). 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” (SQ\_E\_July2010).

Yet another learner who also perceived of language as a tool was SJW. 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...given by English, so we have to learn it or we will in trouble” (SJW\_F\_November2006). During the email 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” (SJW \_E\_July2010). In contrast, while SCC 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 expanded somewhat 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” (SCC \_E\_July2010). This extension from “tool” to “instinct” may indicate a growth in his belief about language that is beyond the functional.

In contrast to the learners above, QU, who was always quite candid, appeared to have undergone greater transitions 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 QU: “But for English...for example, if you read a sentence for a hundred times, of course you will remember it” (QU\_F\_November2006). However, about four half years later, in the email interview, she had this advice for a fictitious junior: “Forget about all the grammars you've learnt for exams in China. Just communicate. [...] You don't have to speak perfect English. As long as you can get others understand what you mean, your English is good enough” (QU\_E\_July2010). For QU, her beliefs about the nature of language, communication and language learning influenced her learning strategies but these beliefs had also been modified by her UDP L2 experience.

In his diary, TC expressed his belief that “language learning is a long process” and thus he had “to spend more time and effort” (TC\_D\_March2006). Accordingly, his beliefs led to much effort and thought to improve his command over time. Around the time of his graduation, TC 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 in speaking: “...people’s accent become hard to change as they grow up.”



(TC\_E\_July2010). 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 and observations pointed to the development in TC’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, though for some, especially SCC, QU and TC, 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. The learners’ perceptions of the nature of language, communication and language learning shape their motivation and strategies which in turn influence their approaches to learning.

#### **4.2.5 L2 Context**

Some of the focal participants also touched on their beliefs regarding their L2 learning context, albeit to a lesser extent than they did for effort, vocabulary, grammar, nature of language, communication and language learning. These few learners saw the L2 context as an important factor to facilitate learning.

In his early experience during the BC and as reflected in his diary, TC seemed to think that his slow progress in talking “freely” to local residents in English might be due to the Singapore socio-cultural context. 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 (TC\_D\_March2006). However, TC eventually learnt to create the

environment he needed for speaking English. When his FYP team extended their welcome to him in Chinese, he “insisted on speaking English and soon they accepted it” (TC \_A\_September2010).

SCC also saw the socio-cultural context as important for his English learning. The NUS environment was very helpful for him as “all around is English” (SCC \_F\_November2006). However, in the subsequent four years, while maintaining his belief in the importance of the L2 context, he seemed to have shifted in his perception of the socio-cultural context he was in as indicated by his response in the exit email interview. 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” (SCC \_E\_July2010). It is possible that, in choosing to pursue his PhD programme in the USA, SCC was looking for a new L2 context which could better provide the ideal socio-cultural environment he aspired to live in, one that was closer to his imagined community.

In terms of learning experiences as part of the L2 context, QU acknowledged that all the different phases of her NUS career were helpful for her English learning. She summed up this belief regarding the L2 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 (QU\_E\_July2010).

Thus, for some of the learners, their belief in the importance of their L2 context, including their out-of-class learning experiences, did impact the development of their English learning. This belief and its transitions were played out differently for the three participants described above. While TC went on to create the L2 context he needed right where he was and SCC probably sought one in an Anglophone country, QU adapted to

each stage of her learning context and the attendant experiences. But the common thread that ran through this part of their journey was that they made the best use of the opportunities available to them.

### **4.3 Strategies**

Given their TCCL background, multi-faceted motivation 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 a new L2 learning context? Analysing the commonalities in the data given 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 approaches

Similar approaches to what I term the natural approach and the deliberate approach that some of the learners in this study adopted for learning and practising English have been studied elsewhere. Gu, in his case study of the vocabulary learning strategies of two PRC learners, distinguishes between intentional learning and incidental learning (2003, 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. Secondly, I have taken my inspiration from the words of one of the learners, RYP: "While in Singapore, we are taught in a nature [emphasis added] style" (RYP\_D\_March2006). Last of all, "intentional" does not seem to adequately express the intensity with which some of this study's focal participants approached their learning. They struck me as being rather deliberate and thus I have decided to use "deliberate" instead.

In the sub-sections below, 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 everyday curriculum and interaction with others and the approach where the learners use specific techniques or methods to expedite their learning or enhance the outcomes. The data presented by RYP and QC indicated that they favoured the natural approach while the deliberate approach was reflected in the data given by SCC, QU and SQ. The two remaining participants, SJW and TC, appeared to have used a combination of natural and deliberate approaches.

#### **4.3.1 Natural Approach**

To say that RYP and QC adopted the natural approach is not to imply that they did not exercise choice or effort on their part but the term is in keeping with their preference for learning through “natural” communication in everyday, normal activities. RYP 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” (RYP\_D\_March2006). 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, RYP 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” (RYP\_F\_November2006). Thus, RYP approached learning in an authentic, cumulative way. In the email interview, he summed up his approach thus: “Learning is accumulated everyday with everyone” (RYP\_E\_July2010).

The other focal participant who seemed to advocate and practise the natural approach with regard to learning strategies was QC. 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” (QC\_F\_November2006). 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 many of the international students in his hall as this was the lingua franca. During his UDP, exposure to and interaction during normal daily activities in his student hall “helped [him] a lot” QC’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...” (QC\_E\_July2010). Interestingly, QC’s remark seemed to reflect the Vygotskian socio-cultural theory of learning that learning is first social and then individual (Vygotsky, 1978, as cited in Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 214). In class, however, he seldom asked questions. He said: “because I find that it is difficult for me to ask questions in English” (QC\_F\_November2006). 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 talk “freely”. He also reported that the reading and writing he had to do in his UDP helped him develop those language skills. So the learning context in NUS provided QC the opportunities to learn in an authentic, natural way.

Both RYP and QC also seemed to show dislike, and even a sense of rebellion, against the possible restrictions of the TCCL strategy of memorising texts with an eye to regurgitating them for tests and exams. RYP called that “humdrum memory” and asserted: “I do not like to learn this way” (RYP\_D\_March2006). QC critiqued the examination-driven education system (fuelled by the aim of university admission) in which students worked hard on exercises assigned by teachers but “never enter[ed] the door of learning English” (QC\_F\_November2006). Thus, both learners had stayed with their preferred approach to learning English without deliberately exploring new strategies to speed up their learning.

### 4.3.2 Deliberate Approach

In contrast to RYP and QC, SCC appeared to embrace the deliberate approach. Among the seven focal participants, SCC may be considered one of the most successful learners on two counts: first, he passed the Qualifying English Test (QET) for freshmen so that he was exempted from the Basic and EAP modules, and secondly, on graduation from NUS, he was admitted to John Hopkins University in the USA for a direct PhD programme. SCC 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 thus:

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 (SCC \_E\_July2010).

This well-thought-through procedure that SCC used to learn and practise vocabulary was revealed in his email interview towards the end of his UDP. However, from the BC, SCC already showed that he employed a deliberate approach to learning English. In his learner diary, written within the first six months of his arrival in Singapore, he had reported on his chief strategy of preview and memorisation of vocabulary lists practised since he was a junior middle school student in China. He also described other deliberate strategies like attending special classes at the New Oriental School (NOS) in China to prepare for the major exams of 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 high school and went on to memorise ten pages per day during the BC.

From the face-to-face interview six months after the BC ended, we learn that SCC had expanded his repertoire of strategies to watching movies and playing computer games.

Thus, there was transition indicated here. 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” (SCC \_F\_November2006). 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 enough to join John Hopkins University.

Another learner who adopted a deliberate approach in her English learning strategies was QU. Like SCC, 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. 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.

To begin with, let us look at the TCCL strategies QU adopted even 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 (QU\_F\_November2006). 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, QU did not stop at these methods even while in China; 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. The availability of

vocabulary learning software was also exploited by QU which she described as “kind of opened [her] door to English” (QU\_F\_November2006).

How did QU develop in her use of strategies after she arrived in Singapore? During the BC, we see her deliberate attempts to explore new strategies. She sought to improve her English skills through the intra- and inter-class debates conducted. Then, to sound more like a native speaker, she experimented with a method she picked up, called “One-breath” English, that is, “to hold a breath and then speak English as quickly, loudly, clearly as possible” (QU\_D\_May2006). 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, this social strategy “just felt so strange... more natural to speak Chinese” (QU\_F\_November2006). After joining her UDP, she found more opportunities to practise speaking as she reported in the face-to-face interview. QU made the conscious choice to join study and laboratory groups which included other nationalities among the international students; in her student residential hall, she also interacted in English with exchange students from other countries. Thus, QU made determined efforts to expand her repertoire beyond the TCCL focus on vocabulary and the related strategies of reading, review, recitation and memorisation. She had transited to enhancing her speaking through social and other strategies.

One other noteworthy element in QU’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 semestral vacation to prepare for modules that required a greater extent of essay writing. QU 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, QU encouraged herself that she had tried hard and



had learned positively from the experience. She also encouraged herself to accept the fear of losing face when speaking English in public and/or with strangers, and to go on despite her “shyness” (QU\_D\_June2006). In all, QU was a determined strategist even as she was deliberate in her approach; she constantly and consciously adapted her strategies in order to meet the learning demands she faced.

Interestingly, SQ, the other female student among the seven case studies, 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” (SQ\_D\_May2006), 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” (SQ\_D\_February2006). SQ 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 found useful. She aptly reflected, “If you are careful and pay attention...you will learn more and live better” (SQ\_D\_March2006).

However, about midway through the BC, SQ 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” (SQ\_D\_March2006). 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 TCCL strategies and it appeared that SQ was revisiting her comfort zone. However, she continued to expand her repertoire of strategies. She used affective strategy when her motivation was

low by encouraging herself to overcome her negative feelings and she made plans to push on in her learning. In terms of social strategy, SQ 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 in the metacognitive category where she evaluated task demands to prepare for her weekly Oral Report. SQ recounted that she spent “a lot of time” to plan the topic and the delivery (SQ \_E\_July2010).

By the time she was one semester into her UDP, SQ 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 SQ herself put it during the face-to-face interview, “If you study hard enough, you can learn it well” (SQ \_F\_November2006). At the end of her four-year UDP, when asked in the email interview what advice she would give to a junior, SQ advocated self-directedness and self-discipline in the BC: making a plan, setting a goal and not straying “from the right path” (SQ \_E\_July2010). In other words, a conscious and deliberate approach is necessary for one to reach one’s destination in the English learning journey. SQ 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 steadfastly grounded in her original beliefs and strategies while reaching out to include new ones.

#### **4.3.3 A Combination of Natural and Deliberate Approaches**

The two remaining participants demonstrated a combination of the natural and deliberate approaches described above. Starting with SJW, 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 10pm nightly. The strategy worked and he obviously enjoyed it from his evaluation that he felt “really good” about

the method (SJW\_D\_February2006). 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” (SJW\_D\_March2006). Thus, SJW 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 (SJW\_D\_March2006).

In the face-to-face interview, SJW 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.

(SJW \_F\_November2006).

Thus, he made himself aware of other possible strategies while being proactive in managing his own learning strategies. During his four years in NUS, 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 exit email interview (SJW \_E\_July2010).

However, there appeared to be some transition in his approach to strategy use during the later stage of his UDP. SJW 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 the former, his SEP at the University of California, Santa Barbara, 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 US and other countries...“and also learned a lot from them.” In the latter, his 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” (SJW \_E\_July2010). As many of the professors in the Physics department were native English speakers, interacting with them also helped SJW’s English skills. SJW can be counted as a successful learner 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 TC. His is the most 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 TC seriously analysed his learning strategies as well as his performance and experiences in the BC. The headings to and the topic 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 deliberate 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 (TC\_D\_March2006). He then went beyond familiar TCCL territory to leverage on 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, TC also used affective and metacognitive strategies to manage his emotions and plan his learning

respectively. For example, when he received an “E” grade for his 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, TC also seemed to cross certain thresholds in his learning as he consciously adopted and adapted strategies.

In his UDP, TC became very absorbed in his studies as a Physics major and did not appear to focus on English learning. In the exit 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.” TC developed to the point where that he was “proficient in English reading and listening and even naturally think in English.” However, his speaking must have lagged behind, prompting him to say that “thinking in English is still different from articulating in the same language” (TC \_E\_July2010).

His perceived handicap in speaking really bothered him during his SEP at an American university. First, he felt the SEP experience, though 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” (TC \_E\_July2010). He reckoned that he spent most of his time on his research projects and left little time to socialising. Secondly, 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 USA for only six months. The waiter said he attained his proficiency “by diligence”. TC revealed that he felt “terribly ashamed” after that encounter and decided to renew his efforts to improve his English in a focused, deliberate approach (TC \_A\_September2010).

Hence, after he returned to NUS from the SEP, TC chose a Final Year Project (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 TC, he “insisted on speaking English and soon they accepted it” (TC \_A\_September2010). Though TC believed in fossilisation, that “people’s accent becomes hard to change as people grow up”, yet he encouraged himself to go on learning (TC \_E\_July2010). 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 turned on the radio to pick up the BBC World Service. Such was his determination to stay on course in 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 had 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 more universal methods like reading, watching movies, listening to the radio and using IT. Some of these 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 learnt 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 the repertoire of strategies for the learners over time, whatever approach they adopted. They adapted the TCCL strategies or experimented with and added new strategies, demonstrating the active stance they took towards their English learning.

## **Chapter 5: AFFECTIVE DOMAIN, IDENTITY, AGENCY AND INVESTMENT**

When we recall that the seven focal participants were all scholarship holders recruited via a stringent process by Singapore's MOE officers from the better, if not best, universities in China, we may tend to think of them as terribly cerebral beings. In attempting to study their learner characteristics and the transitions they made when journeying 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 and learner identity. That would be an oversight I would have made had I not worked with PRC SM3/SM2 students from 1997 and noticed how much their feelings and sense of identity affected these students and their learning during the BC. Thus, I included the affective domain in my previous studies (Young & Fong, 2003; Fong, 2006b) as well in the present one. Having become more acquainted with studies on learner identity in social contexts from around 2010, I decided also to include this aspect in my current research. Having looked at the findings on motivation, beliefs and strategies in the last chapter, in this chapter, we will focus on the affective domain, and learner identity with its related notions of agency and investment.

### **5.1 Affective Domain**

Combing carefully through the Affective Domain column in the Themes Table distilled from the seven case studies, I identified 45 feelings mentioned or implied by the focal participants in their diaries, interviews and the sole autobiography. Among these 45 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 5.1 below presents a visual representation of this four-way division of the affective factors that were involved in the English learning of SJW, SCC, RYP, QU, SQ, QC and TC. A particular feeling might have been cited by different participants and this is reflected by the number that follows the emotion. Altogether, there were 98 citations of feelings culled from the

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

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

**Table 5.1: Feelings Cited by the Seven Focal Participants**

The four categories were first arranged in contrastive pairs: Happiness and Fear, Confidence and Shame. This arrangement, however, turned out to be one in descending order of the number of citations for each category.

What does this quantifying of the affective dimension reveal? What am I attempting to show the reader? First, that the affective dimension was an important learner characteristic of the seven participants; it featured prominently in their thoughts and expressions as they went about their learning. The feelings they experienced had a



significant impact on their learning journey so much so that feelings were mentioned an average of 14 times by each of the participants in the data they supplied. Secondly, there were both positive and negative feelings that impacted these learners in their quest to become proficient in English. 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 motivating the learners on in their journeys. Interestingly, fear was very close behind happiness in the number of citations: 28 versus 29. And shock, anxiety, nervousness and the rest of the “fearful” feelings were 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). And 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 when they felt that the BC had become routine and 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 look at the learner characteristic of affect and the transitions made along this journey as manifested in the participants’ reports of happiness, fear/unease, confidence and shame.

### **5.1.1 Happiness**

What would make learners happy and persevere in their endeavours? Praise and encouragement by others, especially their English teachers, seemed to have made a lasting impact as in the case of SCC, TC and RYP. SCC recorded the following in his diary entry 3:

...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...(SCC\_D\_March2006).

TC 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" (TC\_D\_February2006). In a similar way, for RYP, 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" (RYP\_F\_November2006).

Happiness also accompanies learning when learners successfully completes a challenging communication task, whether it is reading the original versions of the Harry Potter series or talking to strangers during the BC. This was how QU 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 (QU\_D\_February2006).

Likewise, for SQ, 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..." (SQ\_D\_February2006).

Ultimately, the goal for some of these learners was to become proficient English. For QU, the prize at the end of her transition through 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 (QU\_E\_July2010).

### **5.1.2 Fear/Unease**

When I think that these young people (most likely with their parents' blessing) made the decision to transplant themselves from the familiarity of home, university and country into the strangeness of NUS and Singapore, I believe they paid a certain price, their scholarships notwithstanding. Much was at stake, not least 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 SJW 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...(SJW\_D\_March2006).

Similar feelings of perplexity and disappointment were expressed by SQ, QU, QC and TC in the course of the BC, especially when they felt they were not making progress. At mid-point in the BC, QC expressed disappointment over his perception that his English was "too poor to be improved" but recovered courage later to persevere. (QC\_D\_March2006). QU wrote in her diary: "...why 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?" (QU\_D\_March2006). 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, QU described the Oral Report as a “torture” (QU\_D\_March2006) which engendered fear while RYP was “shocked...anxious...nervous” that “such embarrassing performance would be a regular program every week because it was rarely requested in China.” But after a successful maiden effort “with flying colors”, he grasped the task significance (RYP\_D\_March2006). At beginning of the debates, QU felt “desperate” because of the motion assigned but became “more confident” after discussion (QU\_D\_April2006). 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 TC and QU. Frustration was palpable for QU when she could not practise speaking English with the local community who quickly identified her PRC origins and responded to her questions 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. As for TC, it was a “painful reminder” of his far-from-native accent when he 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” (TC\_A\_September2010).

But for TC, 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 (TC\_E\_July2010).

Thus, it was the fear of being unable to attain their ideal L2 self as a fluent speaker with a native like accent that made some learners uncomfortable. But the good that came out of such fears was a greater determination to succeed, as exemplified by TC's example above, in order to reach the goal of becoming fluent English speakers.

### **5.1.3 Confidence**

“Confidence” was the single most cited affective factor (11 times) among all the feelings mentioned by the seven focal participants in the data they supplied. As seen from the early diary data, the learners had already begun to build their confidence in learning English during their junior and senior middle school days 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. The story continued to unfold as they acquired greater confidence in the course of their middle school years. When they began a new chapter of their life and learning journey in Singapore, the confidence continued to develop amidst the ups and downs, joys and fears that they experienced. At the end of their UDP, all of them 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, writing the language for PRC learners.

Starting with SCC, 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 privately from the “basics”. He quickly caught up 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.  
(SCC\_D\_March2006).

It was a similar story for QU 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” (QU\_D\_February2006). Thus, making progress in her English proficiency early in her journey also contributed to QU’s confidence.

After she arrived in Singapore and joined NUS, QU’s confidence continued to develop during the BC, her UDP and her SEP experience.

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 (QU\_E\_July2010).

At the end of her UDP, QU 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 (QU\_E\_July2010).

Another learner, SJW, 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. ...gradually, you will gain confidence and your English has improved without you noticing it. (SJW \_E\_July2010).

Thus, the learning context and the demands of the curriculum had brought about the changes in proficiency and confidence for SJW.

Though he did not mention confidence directly, TC 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.” (TC \_E\_July2010). TC 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. SQ mentioned the pride she felt at the sudden realisation that she was listening and speaking in her “secondary language freely” during one BC session (SQ\_D\_March2006). 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” (SQ\_F\_November2006). 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 learner during the exit email interview: she estimated that she was at the 60% mark of her English learning journey which was past the halfway mark in her journey (SQ \_E\_July2010). But towards the end of the BC, she had expressed boredom and discouragement with the routine and monotony of the course. Thus, as the learners develop greater proficiency and confidence during the BC, they may need to be challenged with more complex tasks and activities to help them stay interested and “hungry” to learn. This is a possibility that teachers and curriculum developers of bridging courses should keep in view.

Interestingly, another issue that at first seems unrelated to confidence is shame. More accurately, we often think of the two affective factors as opposites. QC, however, first alerted me to the relationship between confidence and shame in his 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” (QC\_F\_November2006). For QC 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” (QC\_E\_July2010). However, he revealed that confidence could be built up if learners like him were given encouragement by teachers. Happily for QC, 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” (QC\_E\_July2010). Thus, encouragement from teachers appeared important to help students like QC who might feel “ashamed” because they could not speak “very good English” to make the crossing into daring to speak.

Following, QC’s revelation, I picked up a similar signal from RYP in the email interview. Though 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” (RYP\_E\_July2010). 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.

#### **5.1.4 Shame**

We had seen in the previous sub-section the shame that the participants felt when they made mistakes in speaking or when they felt they did not speak good English. It was a happy ending, however, that RYP and QC both made the crossing from shame to confidence in the course of their time in NUS.

Other participants also broached the issue of shame and the related feelings of shyness, embarrassment, guilt and regret in the data, but without relating them directly to the issue of confidence. QU 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 is 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 RYP 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 (QU\_D\_April2006).

The cause for regret for QU was a matter of accountability to others. As she herself put it, losing an inter- or intra-class debate was “no big deal”, but for young learners from a TCCL 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 QU expressed her regrets to her teammates in the 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” (QU\_D\_June2006). Thus, the matter of making a fool of oneself in public is probably a serious concern with students like QU who found it rather face-threatening. It was just too humiliating to be seen as speaking badly and this reason might have prevented many from speaking English in public.

During the face-to-face interview, QU gave a possible reason for the shyness that many new PRC students seem to display: “...most 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” (QU\_F\_November2006). Thus, the lack of opportunities to practise speaking prior to arriving in Singapore might have made many students feel handicapped at speaking, especially at the beginning. They felt shy about displaying what they perceived as their poor English and this in turn could have delayed their progress in speaking. Until they could overcome that shyness, their progress might be slow.

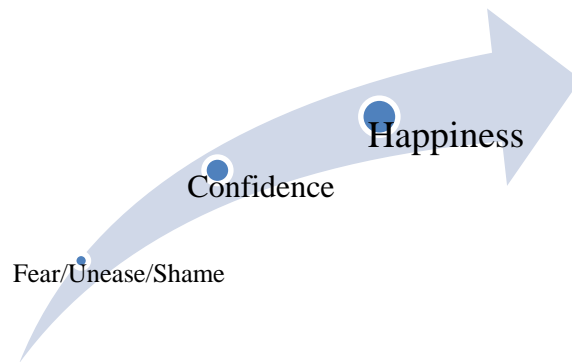
For yet another learner, TC, the acute sense of shame he expressed in his autobiography came about following an encounter he had during his SEP in the USA. He met a Chinese waiter in a restaurant whose English sounded native-like to TC:

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. I asked him how he learnt English so well. He answered ‘by diligence’ (TC \_A\_September2010).

TC’s written English as seen 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 peers. 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” (TC \_A\_September2010). Indeed, I believe TC’s efforts had paid off. In his autobiography, he sounded 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 strengths 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. The affective factors were a significant driving force for these learners in transition. In turn, their affective dimension also underwent transitions, growing from fear/unease to happiness, shame to confidence as they developed greater competence along their learning journey. In Figure 5.2 below, I represent this growth as an upward trajectory.



**Figure 5.1: The Affective Dimension: An Upward Trajectory**

## **5.2 Identity, Agency and Investment**

While I found the notions of motivation in SLA a useful beginning to investigate the English learning journeys of the PRC learners in my current and previous studies, I also found resonance in the notions of learner identity in social contexts which I first came across in readings and conference attendance around 2010. For this study, I based the analysis and report of my findings on social identity mainly on the framework and definitions of Norton's 2000 work, *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change*. I found the notions of identity, agency and investment in this framework another helpful lens for the description of the seven focal participants' learner characteristics and transitions.

Norton 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 my analysis of 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, (2000, p. 3). As agents, learners are active in the construction of the terms and conditions of their own learning. Agency provides the motive and significance that link investment to action. According to Norton, the notion of investment “conceives of the language learner as having a complex social history and multiple desires.” 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” 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” (pp. 10, 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, making the transition from China to Singapore, how had their learner identities been impacted in the process? What stayed the same and what changed in their four and a half 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 mid-way in the BC, SJW'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. In his diary he wrote, "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..." (SJW\_D\_March2006). 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 own bewilderment. "In real life, I often feel very puzzled and perplexed, especially when faced with some options..." He was at that time contemplating which major to select for his UDP at NUS. However, he asserted his agency to resist being constrained by circumstances. "My score in the National College Entrance Examination is not high...it 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." (SJW\_D\_April2006). Thus, SJW negotiated his possible self and constructed his identity despite his predicament. In all, this learner has a resilient identity; we will see in the next section how he asserts his agency and invests in his identity.

At the beginning of his NUS career, RYP looked at his identity from different angles. First, he was conscious of his privileged identity: "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...I expect the stirring university life" (RYP\_D\_May2006). 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" (RYP\_E\_July2010). However, he had transited from a mere learner to a real user

of English in his identity by the end of his first year in NUS: "... my English is not good but I'm quite proud that I can understand what the professors are talking about." (RYP \_F\_November2006).

In the email interview, SQ was quite explicit 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" (SQ \_E\_July2010). This was a rather unexpected transition as SQ 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 as explained by Gu (2003). She gave further evidence of this identity in her diary: "...we can learn by living, and enrich our lives by improving English and both of processes are quite enjoyable" (SQ\_D\_March2006). SQ also apparently identified closely with the Chinese students who had gone through the grueling Gaokao system; she informed me that they made huge investment in effort for admission to a good university (SQ \_F\_November2006).

Among the seven participants, QC 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 English teachers, his keen interest in poetry and poets, his close friend, his grandparents, and finally his parents. QC 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 QC's life. His new identity as an NUS BC student might have offered an escape from his past unhappiness.

In the face-to-face interview, QC 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...” QC showed that his strong sense of 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” (QC\_F\_November2006). There was apparent resistance to modifying his cultural identity despite moving into a new cultural context. Thus, it was a surprise that, in the exit email interview, QC offered this advice to an imaginary freshman: “Mentally value this opportunity to study English” (QC\_E\_July2010). Despite his resistance to English culture in his own freshman year, he seemed to have accepted English and its culture as part of his selfhood, his identity. There appeared to be an on-going identity construction in QC’s life.

TC’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 as best student sustained him in his daily efforts. “[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...” (TC\_D\_February2006). There is the allusion to “face” as in QU’s case. The pride 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 being an excellent and diligent student. This was reflected in the title of his diary entry, “An E in composition part I got” (TC\_D\_May2006). He drew upon an affective strategy, however, to encourage himself to recover from this setback in his identity. Later, in his UDP, TC identified himself as a member of the academic community and was immersed in its culture which was transacted predominantly in English. In his identity as a serious student of Physics, he read voraciously “philosophy and study the history of science in attempt to discover the secret of universe” (TC\_E\_July2010).

Despite the variation in the identities assumed by the focal participants as discussed above, there is a commonality about an important aspect: they have a vision of their future selves living in a future, 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 their 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: SJW, SCC, QU and TC.

At the end of the BC, in evaluating the task significance of the research project, SJW 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.” (SJW\_D\_May2006). This reflection shows that he had his eye focused 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 SJW had done well enough in his UDP to be admitted to a direct PhD programme in Quantum Physics.

For SCC, 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 (SCC\_F\_November2006).

His future ideal self in his imagined community is probably that of a high achiever in either the academic or business world. SCC enrolled in a PhD programme at John 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” (SCC\_E\_July2010).

Another high achiever and also PhD student in NUS, QU, was also concerned with her competence in English as reflected in her diary: she was frustrated that her speech gave away her national Chinese identity too quickly. Thus, she sought different methods



during the BC to approach a Standard English accent. The significance of her Ideal L2 Self became clearer when she revealed that her “dream” was to study in an English-speaking country like America and to become a research scientist; this was her imagined community. Her Ideal L2 Self had remained stable when she evaluated her English learning near her graduation:

I think I am mid-way, but not very far behind from native English speakers. ...how envious I was when I looked at those overseas Chinese on TV who could speak English fluently. ...it seems so sudden that I become one of them (QU\_E\_July2010).

It is apparent then QU’s imagined community was inhabited by native speakers and others who can speak English fluently.

During the BC, TC alluded to his desire to “think in English rather than Chinese” and to use “live vocabulary” in his diary (TC\_D\_May2006). 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. During his SEP in the USA, his encounter with a newly-arrived Chinese waiter in a restaurant who spoke “in perfect American accent” made him feel “terribly ashamed”. After graduation, when he made telephone calls to rent a room, he was mistaken to be 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”. He wrote: “I feel proud of being Chinese, for we are diligent people.” But he elaborated thus: “...we will be better off if we can speak Standard English. ... One day, I believe, I will hear from the other end of the line ‘I though[t] you were from U.S.’” (TC\_A\_September2010). That was TC’s vision of himself in his future, imagined community.

Thus, the learners in the study went through various transitions in their learner identity in their new L2 context in NUS. However, they had the common characteristic of looking to a future imagined community from which they also derived their identity, 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 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. In the paragraphs below, I will highlight how the learners displayed their agency and investment, often in admirable ways.

Let us begin with two participants, RYP and QC, who did not allude much to the investment of time, effort and strategy 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 too showed a certain degree of agency and investment in what they did. RYP took an active part in the debates and seemed to revel in his success: "...we lost but my friends said I did quite well." But it was actually quite unexpected of him as shown by his remarks about his own and his mother's reactions:

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 (RYP \_F\_November2006).

This out-of-character engagement demonstrates the agency and investment on RYP's part when he became inspired by a certain activity.

For QC, 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, Mrs Z, 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" (QC\_D\_March2006). QC 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:

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. 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. (QC\_D\_March2006).

Turning now to SJW, during the BC, when the SM3 students were housed in the same hostel arranged by MOE, he suggested to his roommates to speak in English from 8 to 10 nightly to “create some chances to practice” outside of the classroom (SJW\_D\_February2006). There was clearly agency and investment as shown by 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” (SJW\_D\_May2006). Moreover, he continued to invest his time in strategies that he preferred. Referring to the Self English Learning Facility (SELF) of CELC, he said: “Ah, SELF. I can choose what I like what I dislike.” (SJW \_F\_November2006). SJW also displayed his agency and his 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 (SJW \_E\_July2010).

SCC, in his diary, revealed that it was his mother who started him on his English learning journey by engaging a tutor to help him catch up with what he missed in school. 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:

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 easy [easy] to recite so I had to face the words for several times before totally acquainting with them (SCC\_D\_March2006).

Having caught his mother's vision of English's significant role in the world and in his future life, SCC was willing to work relentlessly in his chosen strategy of vocabulary memorising. 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. This was remarkable agency and investment given his persistent, daily efforts.

Yet another learner who revealed a heightened sense of agency and a substantial amount of investment was QU. Even while in China, she was willing to expend time, effort and money on the Harry Potter series, and on NOS classes. She was exceptionally diligent in preparing for Gaokao: she did five reading exercises a day versus the norm of two for other students.

During the BC, she invested much time and energy in 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." (QU\_F\_November2006). 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." (QU\_D\_May2006). Agency and investment were shown in her response to each L2 context, whether it was in China or in NUS. By the end of her UDP, QU had become a confident communicator not bound by concerns with grammatical correctness nor her fear of losing face.

SQ, 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 in a print shop. She later reflected on how she could make full use of opportunities presented by her ongoing, informal L2 learning context. Her agency was underscored by the assertion when boredom set in during the BC: “I can do something to make it [her life] interesting, meaningful and even wonderful! I have seen the bright side of my present life, I find that it is worth living.” (SQ\_D\_April2006). SQ was also an independent learner who preferred autonomy which also demonstrated her agency: “I prefer to learn on my own... I would like to decide what to learn and how to learn.” (SQ\_F\_November2006).

Though unassertive by nature and diffident in demeanour, TC strove hard daily to maintain his junior middle school class position as “the best” student in recitation (TC\_D\_February2006). That was an early demonstration of his agency and determination. During the BC, he first surprised me with his agency and investment 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, TC 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 (TC\_E\_July2010).

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

### 5.2.3 Empowerment

As mentioned by RYP, the seven participants were among their cohort of privileged SM3 scholars, with a proven record of academic prowess evidenced by Gaokao results and admission to the top universities in China. In NUS, many of the SM3 and SM2 scholars regularly make it to the Deans' List of their respective faculties or schools. Thus, more likely than not, they 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 most local students. Thus, there are theoretically no concerns for these scholars about 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 courage as that of the 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 their daily engagement with the curriculum or 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.

RYP started the BC with the identity of a “guy” who was used to thinking in “computer logic” so speaking at any length during the BC 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, RYP had learnt what self-empowerment was about (RYP \_E\_July2010). This was a huge transition.

QC, 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.” 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: “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 when we are talking about spoken English.” Secondly, it was again the opportunities offered by the NUS learning context and 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” (QC\_E\_July2010). The above explanation had to do more with QC’s engagement with the community than with curriculum. However, the latter did contribute significantly to his empowerment later during his internship:

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 (QC\_E\_July2010).

QC 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 said in his freshman year: “I cannot or don’t want to accept the culture of English, so I found myself difficult to...learn English very further or profound” (QC\_F\_November2006). That is the beauty of self-empowerment and other-empowerment.

During his SEP, SJW enjoyed the “free and open” academic culture at the University of California at Santa Barbara during his Student Exchange Programme (SEP). It was liberating and empowering for him to interact frequently with both peers and faculty. For his Final Year Project (FYP), he could communicate with his German supervisor only in English. And because the professor was “very nice” and accommodated SJW’s “bad English”, he felt empowered to speak “a lot” and thus his English “improved naturally”

(SJW \_E\_July2010). What a contrast to the early diary entry when he “felt void and powerless” over his learning (SJW \_D\_March2006). This was a very substantial transition for SJW in empowerment.

Another SEP participant, QU confessed in the exit 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” (QU \_E\_July2010). 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 (QU \_E\_July2010).

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

SQ’s experience seemed similar 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” (SQ \_E\_July2010). Thus, the NUS learning context was an



empowering one for SQ while she also contributed to her own empowerment by exploiting all the resources available to her.

As for TC, 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” (TC\_E\_July2010). The explanation he gave was 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 (TC\_E\_July2010).

Thus, it was apparent that the curriculum of the NUS context and his agency had contributed to his empowerment. TC 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 in order to achieve their success (TC\_E\_July2010). 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. Thus, the framework of identity, investment and agency, together with empowerment, offered a useful lens to study the learner traits of the focal participants and the transitions they made during their sojourn in NUS.

### **5.3 Summing Up**

Based on the data, it can be surmised that through the process of telling me about their learning journeys, the learners were also making sense of their life and I believe that they emerged with a clearer picture of their place in the larger scheme of things, whether,

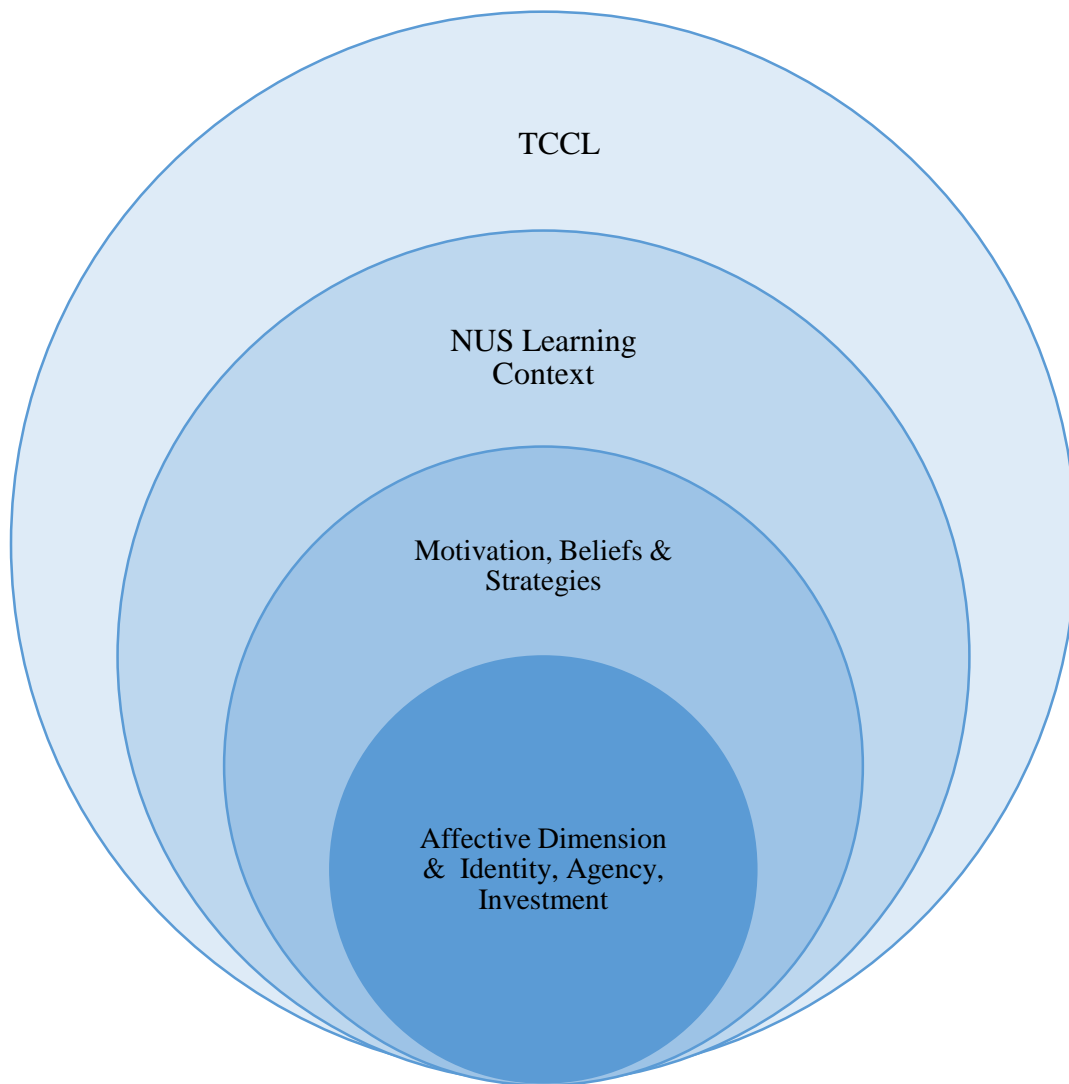
socio-cultural, academic or linguistic. My wish for them is that this clearer perspective will help them with their ongoing journey as language learners.

For the reader and myself, who have been following their learning journeys, let us keep in view a holistic picture of the participants and of the study. First, I remind myself that the participants are unique individuals and not just an amalgam of learner characteristics undergoing transition. Secondly, though we analysed the seven case studies through the separate themes of TCCL, NUS learning context, motivation, beliefs, strategies, affective dimension, and identity, agency and investment to tease out the commonalities in their learner characteristics, we need to remember that within their shared socio-cultural context each focal participant has his or her own socio-cultural history and personality. This is important to note so that we do not lose sight of the richness of the case studies. Thirdly, the themes are not mutually exclusive, tight compartments. In fact, they are interconnected and act upon one another dynamically.

Let us take one learner as an illustration. Even in his first socio-cultural and academic context, TCCL, SCC 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 in his younger days. 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 and worked 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 from then 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 NOS and taking the tests for CET4, 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, L2 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 John Hopkins University in the USA after completing his 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. The above italicized words/phrases are meant to draw attention to the themes and sub-themes presented in this chapter.

To sum up the findings on the seven PRC students, Figure 5.2 is used to depict the interconnectedness of the different learner characteristics and their related transitions for the participants. It comprises four interconnected circles representing the themes acting dynamically together leading to the transitions experienced by the learners as they moved from the TCCL context to the NUS learning context. Working out from this transition in their macro, socio-cultural and academic situations, the learners also underwent transitions in the micro aspects of their learning journeys. While they could not escape the imprint of TCCL, given that they were socialised early into this culture of learning, the participants also displayed traits that were uncharacteristic of TCCL. For example, even while in China, many of them were active learners who reflected on their learning and took steps to achieve their learning goals. Entering a new L2 learning context when they joined NUS, they began a different phase in their learning journeys during the BC and continued in their UDP to experience certain transitions in their cognition and actions as well as in their affective domain and identity. Though not everything changed for these learners during their BC and UDP, there were some significant transitions in their motivation, beliefs and strategies, emotions and sense of identity. In the next chapter, we will go on to discuss the implications of these findings from the analysis of the multiple-case studies.



**Figure 5.2: Interconnection of Learner Characteristics and Transitions**

## **Chapter 6: DISCUSSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

In teaching batch after batch of PRC SM2/3 students, I came to see these students as learners in transition who had to adapt to new contexts in a short space of time. Among these contextual factors, the most apparent were geographic, socio-cultural, academic and linguistic. As one of their teachers in the Intensive English Course, popularly known as the Bridging Course (BC), I was interested in helping them transit, especially linguistically and academically, from an EFL to an ESL situation. In fact, with the globalisation of English, these students would need to adapt increasingly to an English as an International English (EIL) context. In essence, this doctorate project was the natural extension of my effort to understand my PRC students and their needs, as they journeyed through the BC, and to support them in the transitions they were making. I also hoped that my project would benefit colleagues engaged in the same endeavour of teaching PRC and other EFL students. Initially, I had planned to collect data from my 2006 SM3 students only during their first year in NUS. Unexpectedly, due to my health issues and subsequent medical leave, the project grew to cover the duration of their Undergraduate Degree Programme (UDP), as I also collected data during their graduating semester. What had seemed an unfortunate circumstance had turned out to be an advantage that afforded a longitudinal and richer picture of this group of learners and their learning journey through NUS.

The research questions (RQs) I have sought to answer are:

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

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). My particular interest in these characteristics arose from my observations of the successive batches of PRC students who joined the

SM2 and SM3 programmes. Readings in the literature on this learner group also brought up issues related to these characteristics. Moreover, I observed changes over time among these students, both in the abovementioned characteristics and in their sense of their proficiency and comfort level in using English. I became curious about what characteristics these learners brought with them from their previous learning context in China, what transitions these characteristics would undergo in their new context in NUS, and how an understanding of these characteristics and transitions could inform the pedagogy of their teachers. Thus, my research project sought to answer these questions. In RQ1, the transitions refer to the changes in terms of the students' learner characteristics as well as in their perceptions of their competence and confidence in English. With reference to RQ2, I hope to draw implications that will inform and enrich the pedagogy of myself and colleagues engaged in teaching PRC students in higher education.

During the study, I explored the following seven themes which had been distilled through the literature, my decade's experience in teaching and researching PRC students, and eventually the analysis of the data from the 2006 SM3 cohort

1. TCCL
2. NUS Learning Context
3. Motivation
4. Beliefs
5. Strategies
6. Affective Domain
7. Identity, Agency and Investment

The analysis of the data according to these seven themes was presented in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. In the present Discussion and Implications chapter, I will summarise and discuss the key findings on learner characteristics and transitions of the focal participants in Section 6.1, presenting the most interesting findings, from 6.1.1 to 6.1.5. The pedagogical

implications arising from these findings will be presented in Section 6.2 according to the following order:

6.2.1 Equipping the Teacher and the Learner

6.2.2 Designing and Handling Tasks: An Example

## **6. 1 Discussion of Learner Characteristics and Transitions**

### **6.1.1 Culture: Foundational but Not All-encompassing**

The findings of the present qualitative study on seven focal participants indicate that culture does matter though it cannot explain all the learner characteristics of these participants. The students in these seven case studies attest to and display some characteristics described in the traditional Chinese culture of learning (TCCL). However, these PRC learners also embrace and embody some characteristics unlike those associated with TCCL: they are active learners with a strong propensity to change and grow.

The study began by exploring the context that is often associated with the Chinese learners in the literature, namely, TCCL. Cortazzi and Jin (1996) used the term “culture of learning” to refer to a set of expectations, attitudes, beliefs, values, perceptions, preferences, and behaviours thought to be characteristic of society, in this case Chinese society, with regard to teaching and learning. The socialisation into TCCL begins early in childhood and the influence continues even into tertiary education (p. 169). Moreover, this “highly influential Chinese culture of learning a language” stresses the mastery of knowledge from two fundamental sources, the teacher and the textbook (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998). Achievement of learning is effected through “dedication and hard work, through close attention to texts and memorisation of vocabulary” (p. 102). TCCL thus results in learners who may appear to Western teachers as ‘shy’ and ‘passive’ (p. 104). These two writers’ works were echoed by more recent writings of Rao (2001; 2005), Fusheng and Rao (2007), Li (2007) and Gu (2010a; 2010b).

In their diaries, interviews and the sole autobiography, the participants of the present study confirmed TCCL's prevalence in and impact on their own academic experience but at the same time they also showed that they were active learners deeply involved in their English learning. The focal participants commented on various aspects of TCCL, especially the exam-driven and teacher-centred teaching-learning, the belief in effort for achievement, the memorisation of vocabulary, the reciting of texts. However, the focal participants themselves were not cookie-cutter images of the TCCL learner as portrayed in the literature. While these learners emphasised that they need to increase effort for achievement and expand vocabulary for proficiency, they were far from being passive students. Even those among the seven with a quiet demeanour were active, even pro-active, in their quests to improve their English proficiency by their preferred approach and strategy. They reminded me of ducks paddling furiously beneath the water while seemingly gliding effortlessly on its surface. The participants came from a TCCL background but unlike the passive learners depicted in the literature, they actively chose how to go about their learning, adapting and developing as learners in the process. They also evaluated the curriculum and explored new strategies

What accounts for the disparity with literature? I can see two possible reasons. First, in this study, the participants had been given the opportunity through the diaries and interviews to reflect and to voice their thoughts. In their previous context, on the other hand, it was unlikely that they had such an opportunity, given the large classes and exam-oriented learning culture. It might thus appear that the PRC students were passive in earlier studies. This possibility may be inferred from the face-to-face interview given by SJW: "...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" (SJW\_F\_November2006).

Secondly, this study's participants were candid in expressing their active stance probably also because of the positive teacher-student relationship they shared with me. They probably felt that I understood them from our prior interactions. That could have given them the assurance that they could be candid about their opinions regarding their learning and the curriculum. That frankness thus allowed me to learn about their active stance. I



recalled Professor Hughes' comment that the participants were very open with me when she first read excerpts of the diaries. The above have implications for pedagogy, that it is possible to help students to be open in expressing their views and to leverage on being actively engaged with their own learning.

If these learners from a TCCL context were already active learners at the beginning of the BC, what were they like by the time they graduated from NUS? In his email interview, QC summarised what might be a typical transition for these students: the overarching change was confidence. Their beliefs about learning a language had also evolved beyond vocabulary and sentence level grammar to a broader view of the purpose of communication.

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 TCCL and exams remain the paramount motivation for studying English. Good teachers should be knowledgeable and help students pass exams while good students should be characterised by perseverance and diligence. Thus, both TCCL and non-TCCL characteristics present in the data give a "mixed" picture of the learners surveyed. Shi's study may reflect the changing face of ELT in China, especially in the bigger Chinese metropolises.

For the present study, what could account for the seven participants' mixed picture of TCCL and non-TCCL learner characteristics? There could be two main factors among many possibilities. First, SJW, SCC, RYP, QU, SQ, QC and TC were all "products" of their situated historical and cultural contexts. Their learner characteristics had been shaped by TCCL as they progressed through their socio-cultural context and the prevailing school system. Thus, they still carried the imprint of TCCL such as the emphases on vocabulary learning and on effort for achievement. On the other hand, there was reflection and deep learning going on (Biggs, 1996) so that they evaluated TCCL and at times chose other ways of learning beneath the surface of conformity to the prevailing

learning culture. Secondly, being in a new, L2 learning context in NUS, they became increasingly exposed to different learning cultures and were prompted to explore other ways to learn. For example, SQ embarked on learning English and content together and sought opportunities to practise speaking with “strangers” in the NUS community. TC immersed himself in literature on the philosophy and history of science, which led him “to thinking in English.” Thus, the analysis of this facet presented a picture of the PRC learner that is not as an express image of the TCCL learner portrayed in the literature. Moreover, as they adapted to their new, L2 learning context in NUS, there were transitions which I will elaborate on in the following sections. As will be discussed, culture and context influence beliefs, which in turn drive strategies; motivation and investment in identity; and finally the trajectory of emotions.

### **6.1.2 The NUS Learning Context: Opportunities and Empowerment**

The L2 learning context in NUS, in terms of both curriculum and community, the present study shows, has influenced the learning journey of the seven case study participants such that their competence and confidence, beliefs and strategies, motivation and identity, and affective domain, had all undergone changes to varying degrees. The different phases in the curriculum and their related communities provided opportunities and empowerment for learning, hence leading to development along new paths of learning.

The NUS L2 context that the seven learners experienced, which was a combination of curriculum and community, had a significant and positive impact on their proficiency and confidence. The curriculum took the case study participants through the Bridging Course (BC), Undergraduate Degree Programme (UDP), Student Exchange Programme (SEP) or Internship Programme (IP), and Final Year Project (FYP), where they found themselves in diverse situations where English was used: lectures, tutorials, seminars, laboratory sessions, online forums, formal/informal discussions, group projects, presentations, reports and exams. All these situations in turn provided new pathways, and hence opportunities for learning and practising English for these students. Besides the academic context, each phase of the curriculum also means a new community, whether it was in a

hall of residence, student exchange university, project group or internship host organization or clients.

The students were thus immersed in the curriculum and related communities in every phase of their UDP. More importantly, they were empowered to interact as equals among their peers. For some of them, even their professors, who were their social and academic “superiors”, were very accommodating, and helped them along the way, as in the case of SJW. Moreover, these students created opportunities for themselves. SCC advised an imaginary junior to communicate more with professors and peers outside of class while QU adopted a slightly another strategy by making friends with international students from other nationalities.

The exit email interviews indicated that the students experienced a huge transition in competence and confidence as a result of following the curriculum and living in community in the L2 NUS learning context over nearly five years. This is significant for teachers, curriculum designers and the institution itself to have some inkling that our efforts do make a positive difference to this group of learners despite their socio-cultural and academic background. We can thus draw pedagogical implications from this foundational premise to refine all teaching strategies and curricular designs. Besides the transition in their sense of competence and confidence, there were also developments in terms of the learners’ beliefs, strategies, motivation and social identities, and affective dimension. Their learner characteristics in these five areas and their transitions will be discussed in sub-sections 6.1.3 to 6.1.5 below.

### **6.1.3 Beliefs and Strategies: Enlarging the Vision and Fueling the Action**

In the data they presented for this study, all the seven focal participants displayed the characteristic that they held firm, though not fixed, beliefs about learning at the beginning of their learning journey in NUS. The beliefs that appeared to be most frequently mentioned among the seven were those related to effort, vocabulary, grammar, and the nature of language learning and communication. In addition, the data also reflected what

had changed and what had remained constant in the learners' beliefs. The belief in effort had stayed firm between the time they joined the BC and the time they completed their UDP. On the other hand, their beliefs about vocabulary, grammar and the nature of language learning and communication had undergone certain changes during the course of their UDP. There was a broadening of perspective so that they focused less and less on the individual aspects of vocabulary and grammar and increasingly on communication itself and discourse purposes.

All the participants believed that effort was necessary to attain the goal of improving their English proficiency and this belief was reflected in the diary entries and face-to-face interviews in their first year in NUS. This belief was also borne out in their willingness to invest time and resources, take action and explore strategies to reach their Ideal L2 selves. The focal participants' belief in effort was unwavering through their new learning context in NUS and even towards the end of their journey. This is no surprise to me for that belief is rooted in Chinese culture itself and 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 ones I learnt as a primary school student, I had lived with the ethos embodied in them ever since. It was interesting to note that, in his book *Outliers*, bestselling author 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'" (2008, p. 278). An example is "If a man works hard, the land will not be lazy." In his exit email interview, one participant, TC, actually used a pithy remark that sounded almost proverbial: "...few things are unattainable by hard work." This belief is an asset that teachers can exploit for pedagogical advantage. We will take up on this in the sub-section on pedagogical implications.

While effort remained a cornerstone in the belief system of the focal participants, their beliefs in the importance of vocabulary and grammar in language learning were firm but not fixed. There were signs of transitions in these beliefs during the course of their

learning journey in NUS so that there was much less emphasis on vocabulary and grammar in their email interview responses. Since childhood, the focal participants had been taught by their parents and/or teachers that words are the basic building blocks of language. The curriculum they experienced in China also reinforced this belief since vocabulary learning was a major component.

On the other hand, the belief about grammar varied both synchronously and diachronically among the seven learners. In their first year in NUS, QU embraced the critical role of grammar in learning a new language, including French which she was trying to acquire on her own, while QC and SCC detracted from its significance in their own learning experiences. Falling between these two extremes, SQ, SJW, RYP and TC seemed to accept the role of grammar as another tenet of TCCL but they did not relish grappling with it in order to pass exams. Diachronically, change was most evident in QU 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.

Overall, the importance of vocabulary and grammar was frequently mentioned in the diaries and face-to-face interviews in their first year in NUS. The next most mentioned belief was related to language learning and communication which also saw a change. However, over the course of their sojourn in NUS, the above beliefs that characterised the focal participants were tempered by their experiences in their new learning context. The exit email interviews revealed a greater concern for authentic communication and the ability to accomplish tasks than for vocabulary and grammar learning per se.

Thus, it was likely that the learners had made a transition from their earlier beliefs to a broader perspective of authentic communication and meaningful discourse. This perspective seemed to have liberated them in their communication. The change in beliefs had helped these learners to travel further along their learning journey, from discomfort and shame to self-empowerment and freedom. They had also transited from preoccupations over discrete components like vocabulary and grammar, to the big picture

of meaningful communication. Thus, by the time they graduated from NUS, the participants' micro-concern for word level vocabulary and sentence level grammar appeared to have been superseded by the macro-concern for discourse-level communication.

One would then expect that the new developments in their belief system would impact the strategy choices of the case study participants, just as vision would fuel action. The various characteristics impact one another in an interlocking and holistic way which we will discuss further in a later sub-section before proceeding to pedagogical implications. Indeed, the study witnessed a broadening of the repertoire of strategies among the learners. From the beginning of the BC, the seven students were characterised by being active in the use of learning strategies, albeit with noticeable preferences, varying in approach from the "natural" to the "deliberate". This learner characteristic of active strategy use was also where the learners' agency and investment could be most clearly seen. Over the period of this study and along with the evolution of their learner beliefs, all the students expanded their repertoire of strategies through experimenting, adding, discarding, retaining. Even for those who retained the TCCL cornerstones of memorisation, review and reciting, they personalised and adapted the strategies to their own purposes. Their choice of strategies demonstrated a broad concern with learning and communication instead of a narrow focus on the discrete elements of the language.

Besides the transition in their beliefs, another likely reason for the transition seen in the expansion of strategies could be as follows. 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 living and studying closely with. During the BC, SJW watched and evaluated his peers' strategies; he noticed another student who memorised the words from a very heavy dictionary and who had very good English test results. QU found the students in her first-year'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. Motivated by her desire to overcome this setback, she resolved to improve her speaking, adopting the strategy of creating opportunities for

practice by working with international students from countries other than her own. The strategy was effective apparently as she reported in the email interview. In addition, the fear of failure and the desire to succeed (part of their Ought-to Self) had most probably driven these learners to find the means to achieve their goals of competence and confidence, 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.

#### **6.1.4 Motivation and Identity: The Power of Real and Imagined Communities**

While the learner beliefs and strategies of the participants had undergone significant changes, the learner characteristic of motivation appeared to have retained its largely instrumental and Ought-to-self nature between their enrolment in the BC and their graduation from NUS four and a half years later. Moreover, I discern that the community which they belonged to or aspired to belong to had a positive bearing on the nature of these learners’ motivation. In other words, their real or imagined communities (Norton, 2001) had the power to shape their motivation. For instance, at the beginning of the BC, all the participants expressed a mainly instrumental orientation towards learning English in their diary entries and face-to-face interviews. A good command of the language was essential for their studies in NUS and for their future academic or professional careers, and English was thus often referred to as a tool. The university and the academic or professional world were the imagined communities they were expecting or aspiring to join as members. The power of the imagined community was expressed by QU in her face-to-face interview as she hoped to further her studies in English-speaking countries like the USA and engage in research. Thus, English was necessary for her to gain a foothold in this future, imagined communities.

Upon matriculating as students of NUS, the university with its sub-communities of faculty, residential hall, CCA, among others, then became their real community. Living for nearly five years in this real community with its diverse tapestry of sociolinguistic interactions, the mainly instrumental motivation of the participants had remained strong. In the exit email interview, QC, SCC and SJW still referred to the English language as a tool while RYP expressed his desire to learn “more professional writing”. However, it had gradually taken on some integrative strands as already hinted by various utterances, such as QU’s: “I enjoy learning it”. An affective-integrative dimension had developed over the course of their time in NUS. At the time of their graduation from NUS, there were hopeful signs of movements towards a more integrative and ideal-self orientation where English is communication in an imagined community and part of their identity in the future. We will detail this small but perceptible change in the paragraphs below.

First, a word to briefly explain the “*just a tool*” mindset which probably arises from the *ti-yong* dichotomy in the Chinese thought system (Orton, 2009, p. 93). This system 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 USA. Chiang and Schmida (2002) report that these students “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 well-known writer, Amy Tan, said, “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).

The apparent change from English as utility, and therefore a mainly instrumental orientation, towards a more pronounced integrative motivation and a more vibrant Ideal L2 Self was discerned from the responses by some of the learners in their email interviews. SCC did not perceive Singapore as an Anglophone society with the related cultural and historical contexts and had already moved to America’s John Hopkins’ University for his PhD programme. However, he revealed his aspiration for English to



become a part of himself in his new and imagined communities. Another focal participant TC might have had the same aspiration. He was troubled that his accent was far from native-sounding even after his UDP graduation and aspired to sound more like an American. His imagined community was probably situated in the USA where he had his SEP. QU, who had confessed in her diary the fear of losing face when speaking English, had come to enjoy speaking English. This underscored her positive affective disposition to using English and might mean a closer identity with and affinity for the target community of English speakers.

What factors could account for this characteristic of a largely instrumental motivation among the PRC participants and for the apparently small change in orientation towards the end of their UDP? These learners came from a background where they lived and learned with the emphasis on exams from primary school to university. The fear of not doing well enough and of 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. From the diaries of SQ, we learned of how oppressive the exam system could be to the students, especially the Gaokao, the National College Entrance Exam. Performance in this exam would decide not only their university placement but probably their future as well. Thus, the Ought-to Self had probably been a huge part of the students' motivation in learning. Added to this, the SM3 learners carried the social identity of being scholars recruited from the better 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 above a certain Cumulative Average Point (CAP), 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 SJW meant during his first year in NUS that he had to learn English or he would be in for trouble. Four years later, his sentiments remained the same.

It was therefore no surprise that the motivation for learning English remained as mainly instrumental for these learners given the big role of the Ought-to Self in their lives. On the other hand, the beginning of the move to a more integrative motivation might be the result of developing a more pronounced Ideal L2 self and of having a positive L2 experience during the course of their UDP. It is possibly also a result of living in a certain community. For SJW, as an exchange student in the USA, he experienced a semester that seemed to have made a major impact 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.

We need to mention one other significant learner characteristic and transition here: motivation lost and regained during the BC. Within those 23 weeks, some of the participants, SJW, RYP, QU and SQ, experienced boredom and discouragement with learning English. The lack of a clear goal in the form of a major exam might also have caused them to feel demotivated. However, this dip in motivation was temporary as reflected by the positive data from these four participants' email interviews and their successful completion of the UDP. It is important, however, to note here that learners' levels of motivation would probably vary during the BC but teachers need not be unduly alarmed. This was yet another transition for these participants in the course of their learning journey.

Thus, the findings of this study indicate that motivation of these PRC learners seemed to have remained mainly instrumental during their journey through NUS; yet there were encouraging signs that they were transiting towards a more integrative orientation. Looking at the overall picture, we see that even when the Ought-to Self was very much in command, this group of learners had successfully navigated their UDP. At the same time, there was growth in the Ideal L2 Self which augured well for their English learning journey as there was greater possibility of integration with and affinity for their target speech community. Perhaps, the way forward pedagogically may be to gently nudge these learners towards developing an integrative orientation while helping them take advantage

of their instrumental motivation. This implication will be expanded on in the second half of this chapter.

The idea of the target speech community leads us to the learner characteristics of the social identities, investment and agency of the participants. In the foregoing discussion, we have seen the connection between motivation and community for these learners. Here, we are afforded a further glimpse of related characteristics: the connection between community and identity, as well as that between motivation and investment. How the participants conceived of their identities in their various communities, real and future/imagined, impacted their motivation and hence their investment in their English learning. In the exit email interview, most of these new graduates expressed an expanded view of themselves as members of imagined communities, whether academic or social. Their identities could be a complex hybrid because of their origins and early education in China coupled with their later education and careers in Singapore (Teng, 2008).

Let us begin with the identities that the participants presented in the data at the beginning of their journey. They were first of all members of the community of SM3 PRC scholars. RYP expressed this identity explicitly and simply in a diary entry: he was a privileged scholar who had no worries about money or resources. However, for the rest of the participants, other identities appeared to feature more prominently. QC was the most philosophical student among the seven with a strong Chinese cultural identity. Moreover, in his diary, he delved all the way into his early childhood to understand his past and reconstruct a new identity. SCC and QU seemed secure in their accustomed learning strategies and the proficiency already achieved. The latter, however, continued to experiment with new strategies. SQ embodied the ideal Confucian scholar who found joy in learning. She, SJW, RYP and QU did lament the boredom and powerlessness of learning only English continuously for nearly six months. This was out of alignment with their academic and exam-ready identities while in China. Despite this, SJW remained the pragmatic high achiever. TC was shocked by the dismal grade he got for an essay test, his identity as a diligent and excellent student shaken to the core.

From these identities presented during their first year in NUS, the learners continued to construct their particular identities during the UDP, mostly according to their own imagined community. At the time of their graduation, this community could be simply their future careers as alluded to by SQ, SJW and RYP in their exit email interviews. QC, in addition, seemed to have become solidly rooted in the Singapore community and to have assimilated English as part of his identity; he had become confident and comfortable in his communication with the local people. QU, SCC and TC, on the other hand, appeared to aspire to more global identities with a more native-like fluency and accent.

It is interesting to note that the relationship between the PRC learners' identities and their imagined communities has already received attention in recent literature. Gieve and Clark (2005) advocates 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 seem to parallel Teng's (2008) notion of a hybrid identity developed by the SM3 students like the focal participants of this study. With regard to the role of English in identity formation, 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 the present study's participants 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. 114-5). Indeed, the expanded identities of the case studies can be seen as the result of their memberships in both their present/local and their future/imagined communities.

The transition for the participants between the first and final years of study probably could not have happened without their motivation and investment during their BC and UDP, including the various phases of SEP, IP and FYP. They had employed various

learning strategies and taken certain steps in order to fulfil their goals of enhancing their English proficiency. They constructed and reconstructed their identities with twin empowerment: through the many opportunities offered to them to use English and the ones they created for themselves. As summed up by TC who reflected on the motivation-investment that propelled some PRC students to do better than others in their English learning: “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” (TC\_E\_July2010). As reflected in this study, for success to be possible, the doors of opportunity must be there and the learners must want to enter them.

In this section, we started by discussing how the motivation of the participants had remained primarily instrumental but with the beginnings of perceptible integrative strands as they journeyed through NUS. We also saw the impact of real and imagined communities in shaping the motivation of the students. Furthermore, their sense of identity in their real/imagined community influenced their investment and agency to make good their claims to membership. These learners’ identities evolved during the course of their UDP but, at each stage, these identities helped the students towards completing their UDP. Thus, motivation, community, identity, investment and agency were interlinked as a complex of factors that propelled these learners forward in their learning journey, aiding them as they transit from an EFL context to an ESL one.

#### **6.1.5 The Affective Domain: The Trajectory of Emotions**

A wide range in the affective dimension over the duration of their English learning journey was another learner characteristic that the seven focal participants reflected in the data. The students reported a whole spectrum of positive and negative emotions that varied over time, and these feelings both resulted from and motivated their learning. Generally, the trajectory of emotions moved from more negative or extreme to more positive or stable states as the students became more and more competent and confident in their English learning.

The feelings mentioned in the data appeared as fairly discrete instances which could be easily counted and I decided to take a partially quantitative approach for analysing this characteristic of the learners. Altogether, I identified 98 citations of feelings in the diaries and the interviews, yielding an average of 14 citations per student. This underscores the importance of the affective dimension in the learning journey of the participants; the journey was not a purely cognitive or academic experience. Much of their emotional self was involved in their transitions and adaptations from an EFL to an ESL context. The feelings, which seemed to fall into four main categories, fear (28 citations), happiness (29), shame (18) and confidence (23), were experienced by all the participants at some point in their learning journey. For example, at the beginning of the BC, they were generally apprehensive of the Oral Report (OR) but, propelled by fear, they prepared carefully for the exercise. When they had done well, they felt elated and came to grasp the task purpose and the OR became enjoyable.

There were also times when the learners felt disheartened by the apparent lack of progress but encouraged themselves to persevere, as in the case of SJW, QU and SQ. At the beginning of their learning journey, the students often experienced these contrasting feelings but they seemed able to overcome the negative ones and put them to good use. In effect, they were using affective strategy to manage their L2 experience so as to remain positive and to stay focused.

Over time, the trajectory moved perceptibly from fear to happiness and shame to confidence. In the exit 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. This transition from the more negative to the more positive in their emotional state probably indicates that, generally, greater confidence and greater competence are mutually reinforcing. 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 ups and downs in their emotions through affective strategy and other means.

Briefly, we have discussed the most important findings of this study which indicate that the focal participants of the case studies were learners in transition. They carried with them elements of TCCL but were active learners willing and able to adapt to the new L2 learning context in NUS. Working through the NUS curriculum and living in its related communities, these PRC learners' beliefs, strategies motivation, identities and affective domain developed and grew. However, some aspects of these 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.

## **6.2 Pedagogical Implications**

Based on the above key findings, what pedagogical implications can I draw for myself and colleagues in our efforts to support our PRC learners? The present study has highlighted potential issues relating to the teaching and learning of these students and the rest of this section will discuss possible ways curriculum, community and pedagogy can converge to better equip the teacher and the PRC learner. The following two sub-sections will first discuss various possibilities and then demonstrate some of them through a sample lesson outline.

### **6.2.1 Equipping the Teacher and the Learner**

Originally, conceived as two separate sections, preparing the teacher and equipping the learner, these are now presented as one. The actual writing of the chapter made it clear to me that preparing the teacher and equipping the learner are two sides of the same coin. Thus, the pedagogical implications of the key findings will be given as symbiotic parts of one ecological whole, so that teachers can better support their PRC learners in L2 contexts for the students to achieve their own goals.

### **6.2.1.1 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 transit from an EFL to an ESL context, from China to NUS, or any other English-medium university for that matter? In fact, in an increasingly globalized world, PRC students may be transiting not just to ESL, but also intercultural and multicultural learning contexts. Tertiary institutions in Western countries and in Asia which use English as the medium of instruction are receiving increasing numbers of PRC students (Coughlan, 2011; MacGregor, 2010). 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, etc.? In this second half of this chapter, I will attempt to draw some pedagogical implications, based on the findings of this study, to help myself and colleagues in the ELT fraternity to support our PRC students in their learning journey.

We learn from this study that these students are influenced by the traditional Chinese culture of learning (TCCL) to varying degrees. On the whole, we can assume that the PRC students' beliefs and expectations, motivations, strategies, affective dimension, identities have been shaped by this culture though 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 PRC learners in mind, we need to prepare ourselves for the manifestations of the Chinese learning culture 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 the BC or EAP course, to help them make the transition to their new learning context. Bodycott and Walker (2000), as teachers in higher education in Hong Kong, 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) put it, “teachers – by recognizing positive features of their current learning cultures – can help students extend, adapt or adopt new approaches” (p. 2). Thus, when our PRC learners become engaged with their new L2 contexts, they can be guided to continue in their learning through appropriate curriculum and relevant pedagogy as well as supported by their new community. These strategies will be detailed in the sub-sections below.

- **Beliefs and Strategies: Vocabulary Learning and Effort for Achievement**

Through my experience of teaching PRC learners and based on the findings of this study, the ESL teachers can expect many PRC students to demonstrate the prime importance of vocabulary learning to them. At the beginning of the BC or Foundation level EAP class, in fact, in the very first week, some students, will most probably request the teachers to provide a list of useful or frequently used words. They will use such lists for memorising and review as it is the accustomed learning strategy in the TCCL context, especially when they prepared for the Gaokao. The students 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 shared a similar experience: “...vocabulary 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” (2009, 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. This emphasis and her ideas on how to improve this aspect were welcomed and praised by her students. Students coming from a TCCL background also firmly believe in effort for achievement. Many may think that “mastering” English is only a matter of applying themselves, and applying themselves may mean memorising,

reviewing and reciting texts as their previous EFL experience was largely 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 and having to adapt to many changes in their new L2 context: academic, linguistic, socio-cultural. Imagine ourselves suddenly surrounded by people who only speak our 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 must appear to them 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 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 SCC) 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 approach to authentic communication. Eventually, in their exit email interviews, the focal participants showed that they realised this when they focused on communication instead of being preoccupied with vocabulary. The curriculum, pedagogy and community support for achieving this transition will be discussed under Resources and strategies in sub-section 6.2.1.3. However, a word here about memorisation may be in place. This strategy associated with 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 SCC 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 and/or TV programmes, 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 (AWL). More of this will be discussed under 6.2.1.3.

- **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 socio-linguistic environment, both teachers and peers impact their learning journey, academically and affectively. The findings show that teachers' praise and feedback brought joy and encouragement to the focal participants. This finding will probably be true of other international undergraduates 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 SJW, RYP, QU, QC and TC. In their diaries and interviews, they alluded time and again to the sense of shame for not speaking well and hence often the reluctance to speak. The mirror image to this sentiment is elation and confidence when they were encouraged by teachers or had done well in a task as mentioned by all the participants at one point or another. Therefore, let teachers give plenty of appropriate affirmation. Peers' feedback and cooperation also helped learners to review and revise their performance and strategies. SJW, RYP, QU and SQ alluded to being heartened in their learning journey 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 the students. All these would contribute to a positive L2 learning experience that is part of the Motivated Self system conceived by Dörnyei (2010).

Moreover, coming from a TCCL background and Confucian heritage culture (CHC), these students have certain expectations of teachers. So we should not be surprised if our students look to us as the fount of knowledge (Fusheng & Rao, 2007) and model 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 (p. 168-9). This is what the PRC learners may expect from us their teachers albeit in a new learning context where they are undertaking their UDP. Though writing from the perspective of teachers in British higher education, Edwards and Ran (2009) nevertheless have useful observations for teachers of PRC students in other contexts. We need to be prepared for the students’ expectations of teachers to respond to requests for help beyond class or even office hours. If not handled carefully, misunderstandings can arise as these students may see their Western teachers as “too busy and uncaring” (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 L2 contexts are exposed to these views through the widespread use of the Internet in their host or exchange universities and new communities. 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 the 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 ESL teacher has to tread a fine balance as their PRC students will still look to them as a role model of knowledge and virtue, yet 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 QU, SQ, SCC and SJW who commented on the curriculum and pedagogy of the BC and suggested alternative approaches or improvements at some point in the data they provided for the present study. A suggestion here is to gradually adjust the guidance-autonomy balance as well as initiate regular discussions with students to gather their views on the syllabus and pedagogy. A learner diary may also be an effective instrument for gauging 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 Chinese language 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 in order 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, p. 18 cited in Lam, 2011, p. 197). For teacher Yin, one key reason to allow Chinese is to reclaim the students’ attention if they were lost. About two-thirds of her students also agreed that the use of Chinese in class helped them: they could understand better, especially abstract terms and cultural differences (Lam, 2011, p. 201). To sum up, Lam cited Kumaravadivelu’s view: “The discriminate use of Chinese rather an outright rejection of its use in strict adherence to a CLT approach, may be seen as a tribute to the good sense of the teacher or in other words, an example of ‘principled pragmatism’” (1994, p. 30 as cited in Lam, 2011). Based on my experience and the present study, teachers need to decide judiciously 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 or using Chinese is appropriate. I had encouraged shy students to try speaking more English by using a small amount of their mother tongue with them to establish rapport at the beginning of the BC. I then shared my own background of coming from a Chinese-speaking home and my experience of transiting to using more English. I encouraged them that if I could become effectively bilingual (in speaking at least), so

could they. This strategy worked most of the time. The key is to be flexible and sensitive. Students should not be made to feel “deaf-and-dumb” or humiliated when Chinese is totally banned from the classroom, especially in the initial weeks, nor 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 piece of advice I received at the 1999 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 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 I had confirmation of my intuition and belief that establishing a good relationship with my students was 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.

#### **6.2.1.2 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 successive years’ BCs at CELC, NUS have been designed and conducted with the aim of helping the PRC cohorts become more independent learners (see Section 3 of Introduction). Upon the foundation and 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 L2 learners and users of English.

It is hoped that this insight regarding developing the learners' autonomy will contribute to our helping future PRC students, especially those who seem less successful.

- **Motivation, Ideal L2 Self and Imagined Community**

To become autonomous learners who strive to become more competent and confident as they proceed in their learning journey, the PRC students need to have the motivation to succeed in their goals. Motivation is goal-directed (Gardner, 2001) and therefore students must have motivation before they can sustain their language learning (Dörnyei, 2001). As presented in the findings, many of the students had 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 their identity (see 6.1.3).

Certainly, instrumental motivation may suffice for students to learn enough to pass exams and fulfil course requirements. However, if the PRC students are to become independent and proficient users of English, and speakers in their own right, 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. It is a journey that I myself have traversed as described in the Introduction to this study. I was inspired by the story of the Polish sailor, Joseph Conrad, who started to learn English only at age 19 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 when their motivation seemed to be flagging.

To provide the conditions that make it possible for our PRC learners to develop a more integrative motivation, the following are some suggestions to my ELT colleagues. First, we can work with the instrumental motivation and the belief in effort for achievement that most 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. Secondly, we can provide as positive an L2 learning experience 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. Thirdly, we need to facilitate an on-going 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 with EIL. They need to be made aware of their unfolding learning selves in continuity and fluidity as they journey onward. It is hoped that all the above suggestions can together provide a broader vista to help the PRC students persevere in their English learning journey especially when their motivation take a dip at some point or other.

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 (CMC), 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 socio-cultural theory are useful frameworks for understanding the need for the involvement of community.



For a start, senior members of the SM3 or SM2 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 other 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 in the English learning journey 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 had used when I 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 from different cohorts met at one of these events and got married after their graduation. Becoming linguistically adept at learning French too, the couple had gone on to study in France and completed their MBAs at the HEC, Paris.

The local and international students in the new L2, globalised contexts can provide another source of community support for the PRC students especially during the BCs. 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 FL learners in a university through synchronous chat. Both groups reported benefits. Thorne (2004) used an e-mail-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). This strategy has 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.

### **6.2.1.3 What/How to Teach and How/Where to Get Help**

- **Pedagogy, Resources and Strategies**

The curriculum, or programme, and community are crucial but the teachers’ pedagogy and decisions are equally important. They do ‘linguistic and cultural bridge building’ (Teo, 2008 as 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 characteristics. For example, knowing that they are unaccustomed to speaking in class in the EFL context, teachers may need to provide suitable stimulus to elicit the desired response and engagement in the ESL 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 students need to be initiated into the Anglo-Saxon or Western culture of learning. In particular, coming with 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 being the only target audience (Liu, 2010). Oral skills for discussion and presentation in an academic setting should also be learnt and practised to prepare the students for the demands of their UDP. 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 these four skills are being built up, students can be guided to widen their grammatical structures and vocabulary usage.

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 CELC BCs (SM2 and SM3) have used various approaches. Some of us host our students to a meal in our home, especially during the festive seasons of Christmas or the Chinese New Year, while others have taken small groups on visits to places of interest. A more formalised approach was described by 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, practices, etc., 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 one 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, QU, 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, SCC not only memorised vocabulary but practised using the words in writing and speaking while SQ 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. As I point out in *Methodology*, 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 the 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. For the current study, the diary helped the focal 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, besides providing the data for this study. Thus, it proved to be a very useful tool for learning, teaching and 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 likely to be digital natives. It is highly probable that social as well as academic communication is mediated by participation in digital environments such as social networking sites and blogs, websites, instant messaging, gaming, and voice and text messaging over cell phones (Thorne & Black, 2007). Thus, teachers can recommend corpora and websites, such as the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Academic Word List (AWL) to provide learners a headstart in independent vocabulary learning. As for speaking, the spoken component of the American National Corpus (ANC) 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 contextualization 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 these young learners with the necessary human resources to aid them in their learning journey within the institution. For example, in NUS, the students should be provided with the necessary guidance and assistance by teachers. The former SM2/3 students (that is the SM2/3 imagined community), and the NUS student community can also be tapped upon and can prove a tremendous resource as mentors. Together the above groups can provide academic, linguistic and social support. At a higher level, the communication channels with the university officials and MOE officers 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 L2 learning context. The students themselves, however, should also be active and even pro-active to seize or create opportunities for themselves to practise the language skills most important to them. Drawing on a parallel 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 recommended 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.

### **6.2.2 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 the students faced and the emotions they had to contend with. 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 discussion in the initial phase of the BC.

Speaking appeared to be the most difficult to master for many of the participants. They have 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 most 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 a current/future BC. In the original OR, 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 endeavor 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 end result of the task 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 (see ZCX's self-report, p. 251).

### Outline for OR Training

1. In the past, most teachers including myself left it to students themselves to prepare for and deliver their weekly OR. Then I listened, invited peer comment and gave comments, which constituted post-activity training. Teachers are usually very busy 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 is to help these students integrate different language skills and to provide training in collaborative learning.
5. Each day, about 4 students give their OR so that all 20 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 4 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 (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 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 videos of good ORs.
9. Students are to rehearse OR with a partner. Thus, I integrate skills for the task and scaffold the learning and practice.
10. A post-OR small group discussion on what went well and what could be done better will be conducted 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. 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).



## CONCLUSION

### Disembarkation

In the Introduction, I described to the reader how I embarked on my PhD journey after I had taught and researched PRC students for nearly a decade. I had hoped that my research project would enable myself and colleagues similarly engaged in ELT to better support our PRC learners when we better understand their learner characteristics and transitions, to and during their sojourn in new L2 learning contexts. To spy out the land, I invited the reader to travel with me through the Review of Literature, pointing out the research findings on the Chinese culture of learning (TCCL), as well as those on the Chinese learners in study-abroad settings. The Methodology chapter presented us with a map of how the research project advanced in its quest for qualitative data; the multiple-case study approach adopted; the four instruments deployed and the multi-tiered analysis employed. Ascending Findings, the reader and I looked back on the paths carved out by the seven focal participants; we then surveyed their key learner characteristics and transitions through the kaleidoscopic lens of TCCL, NUS Learning Context, Motivation, Beliefs, Strategies, Affective Domain, and Identity, Agency and Investment. Descending to Discussion and Pedagogical Implications, I attempted to make sense of the findings by drawing together the salient features to form a plausible composite map of the participants' English learning journeys for the reader and myself. Recommendations were then laid out as landmarks so that those coming after us on similar missions may not find themselves in uncharted territory. Arriving now finally at Conclusion of the thesis, it is time perhaps for the reader and myself to disembark from the journey undertaken as a result of this project.

On the other hand, the seven young people, the focal participants who provided me with the possibility of carrying out this project, will continue in their English learning journeys, making more interesting and significant transitions, in search of their Ideal L2 Self, which in turn is a changing entity as the learners develop in their overall identity. The NUS L2 context was but one segment of their journey and they are now on the next

leg of their quest. After these seven young people graduated from their UDP, interestingly, four of them remained in NUS in one capacity or another. SJW and QU were admitted to direct PhD programmes while RYP and QC were employed as research personnel in laboratories affiliated to the Engineering Faculty. Of the others, SCC started on a PhD programme in John Hopkins University in the USA while the remaining two joined the workforce: SQ in a technological firm and TC in Nanyang Technological University. I look forward to learning more about them in the years to come.

However, before I take leave of the reader, let us look back on the insights we have learnt from the information that the participants have so generously shared of their learning journeys. Their experiences have offered us a glimpse into the world of the PRC learners and the transitions they made in moving from high school in China to NUS in Singapore. Let us now recall the landmarks of the study and reflect on possible limitations.

### **Landmarks**

Through the findings of the project, we learnt that some of what is in the literature about TCCL and the Chinese learner was confirmed by the seven focal participants in their diaries, interviews and the autobiography. In fact, they themselves embodied some of the traits attributed to TCCL. However, not all their learner characteristics were those associated with TCCL. Thus, we can deduce from this that culture is foundational but not all encompassing. Moreover, transiting into and through the NUS learning context, these students' learner characteristics underwent changes that became most apparent at the time of their graduation. They had felt empowered by the opportunities given to them as well as those they created for themselves. There was tangible growth in their sense of their own competence and confidence as well as development in many aspects of their learner characteristics, namely, beliefs, strategies, motivation, identity and the affective domain.

In their new learning context, the participants had a broader view of possibilities, and driven by newly minted or reshaped beliefs, they developed and adapted learning strategies to achieve their goals. These goals in turn drove their motivation and shaped

their identity. And their identity included not only their Ought-to Self working to succeed in a real community but also their Ideal L2 Self aspiring to a future, imagined community. Nor was it an all-cognitive enterprise; the findings show that affect was very much a part of these learners' transition through NUS; a whole spectrum of emotions, from fear/unease to happiness, shame to confidence, was experienced by the participants throughout this learning journey. It was heartening to note, however, that as they gained in competence, the learners also expressed greater happiness and confidence. Just as heartening was evidence that some of the participants had seen beyond the discrete elements of language, such as vocabulary and grammar, to grasp the value of real communication. However, the transitions were not all encompassing; some aspects of the learner characteristics had remained constant, for example, the belief in effort for achievement and the mainly instrumental motivation.

Yet, the “unchanging” learner characteristics are not necessarily “bad”; as teachers to this group of students, we can take advantage of them to foster learning and build rapport. This is especially needful at the beginning of our contact with students newly arrived from a TCCL context, when they may have certain expectations of us, their teachers and therefore significant adults, in their learning journeys. We have, however, to guide them towards expanding their beliefs, strategies, and motivation as well as managing their emotions and developing their identity. Our goal is learner autonomy so that our pedagogy and support will move our PRC students along the path of becoming more independent learners. To this end, both curriculum and community are to be tapped for the resources to aid these learners in their English learning journey. When we have evidence that our PRC learners can function confidently and competently in both curriculum and community, our job is done. More than that, I believe that some of our students will go on to gain a measure of success in both, as we have seen of the participants of this study.

## **Limitations**

Going beyond the landmarks, let us now turn to examine the limitations of this study. First, in terms of numbers and approach, this study comprised seven participants and adopted a multiple-case study approach. As we have discussed in Methodology, one limitation of this small number and the case study approach is the 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.

Secondly, 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. On the other hand, this fact does not necessarily limit the usefulness of the insights to other learning contexts. As we have discussed in the literature review, PRC students in other study-abroad contexts appear to experience the same challenges and transitions as the participants of this study. Instead, we may view NUS as a microcosm of the PRC study-abroad experience, similar to that of many other universities in Asia and in 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, as seen from the data supplied by the participants of this study. Internationalisation also comes in the forms of tie-ups with other universities through student exchange programmes, twinning programmes and other alliances. The university is also a comprehensive one offering a myriad of degree programmes and modules. In terms of the quality of teaching, quantity and quality of research output, and facilities, NUS probably also has much to offer. 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 PRC students in other ESL or EIL contexts.

Thirdly, the sampling of this study may be faulted as the participants were arguably successful students who learnt English well enough to complete their UDP and go 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? Moreover, those who responded to the email interview in their final year must have been motivated, enthusiastic students in the first place and thus likely to succeed in their UDP. As detailed in the Introduction and Methodology, I chose the path of opportunistic sampling in Stage 2 of data collection when only seven out of the original 38 diarists responded. Moreover, there was a good distribution of personality type, family background, level of English proficiency, overall performance and subject major among the seven and these differences showed up in the findings and their paths after graduation. Even among the high achievers, SJW, SCC and QU, 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 outdated as the data were collected between 2006 and 2010. Since it is common knowledge that China is continually changing, socially and economically at least, 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. I believe the fundamentals have remained the same. Last semester (August to November, 2013), to find out what the current PRC students are like, I invited the former SM2 students and current NUS freshman in my 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 small number was not unexpected; they were busy at the beginning of term with much to adjust to. Moreover, I

was new to them and they probably did not feel the need to accept my invitation. But 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. Very briefly, TCCL, was mentioned by JY and ZCX; transitions in the NUS learning context was cited by JY; the L2 learning experience, especially those associated with teachers, by SRY and ZCX; belief in effort by ZCX; motivation by XYY and ZCX (instrumental) and CLY and ZCX (integrative); agency and demotivation by ZCX; imagined community by XYY and ZCX; strategies by SRY and ZCX; the affective domain by most of them. We can see from the above that ZCX seemed to have covered most of the themes of this current study and for that reason, I have reproduced 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 “defended” the value of my study despite the limitations, I will proceed to suggest possible research directions that could emerge from my research. New pathways that can be forged for future studies on PRC learners or even other international students are discussed in the next section.

## Directions

First, the current study using a longitudinal, qualitative, 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 the Chinese learners based on data supplied by the focal participants themselves; they were given the opportunity to tell us their experiences, thoughts, feelings, actions, sense of identity, hopes and plans, in relation to their English learning. This in contrast to previous studies on PRC students as cited in the literature review, where the findings were based mainly on observations by teachers, often Western ones, or quantitative surveys carried out on a whole cohort. Thus, I recommend for future research on PRC or other groups of students the use of similar in-depth, triangulated, qualitative approaches where participants are given a chance and a voice to share their learning journeys. This has the potential for yielding rich, authentic data that will help us to learn more about the characteristics and transition experiences of our students. This in turn will help us better support them in their English learning journeys.

Secondly, 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 socio-cultural 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 massive. It would be necessary for researchers to carefully plan the management and analysis of the data.

Thirdly, 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 PRC 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.

Fourthly, 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 weaker 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 survey more specific areas that could be studied. A study on the strength of TCCL's influence on recent/succeeding cohorts of senior high school graduates seems a worthwhile future project. The findings can inform the curriculum and pedagogy of higher education in both China and study-abroad contexts. With China's development and push for reforms in its ELT, there is speculation that TCCL's influence is being gradually eroded. However, this has to be borne out by careful research.

In addition to 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? Do emotions still feature prominently in their learning journeys? What kinds of identities do they possess or aspire to possess? 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 own transformation as a result of the 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 transited from being an L2 learner to becoming an L1 learner in my own English learning journey. I had wanted to help them 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 ten and 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 should really disembark now; I have said such a long goodbye in this conclusion when I had intended it to be concise and academic. I ardently hope the reader has enjoyed this journey as much as I have and my project will be a help to colleagues and students in their journeys.

Fare ye well!

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Alaszewski, A. (2005). *Using Diaries for Social Research*. London: Sage.

Allison, D. (1998). Investigating learners' course diaries as explorations of language in *Language Teaching Research* 2(1), 24-47.

Atkinson, P., & Coffey, A. (2004). Analysing documentary realities. In Silverman, D. (Ed.), *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). London: Sage, p. 56-75.

Belcher, D., & Connor, U. (Eds.), *Reflections on Multiliterate Lives*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Biggs, J. B. (1996). Western misperceptions of the Confucian-heritage learning culture. In Watkins, D.A., & Biggs, J. B. (Eds.), *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological, and Contextual Influences*. Hong Kong / Melbourne: Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong / Australian Council for Educational Research, 45-67.

Bloor, M., & Wood, F. (2006). *Keywords in Qualitative Methods. A Vocabulary of Research Concepts*. London: SAGE.

Borland, K. (2004). 'That is Not What I Said'. Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research. In Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. Eds.), *Approaches to Qualitative Research. A Reader on Theory and Practice*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 522-534.

Byram, M., & Feng, A. (2006). (Eds.) *Living and Studying Abroad: Research and practice*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

- Campbell, C. (1996). Socializing with the teachers and prior language learning experience: a diary study in Bailey, K.M., & Nunan, D. (Eds.), *Voices from the Classroom*. Cambridge: CUP, 201-223.
- Canagarajah, A. S. (1999). *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Casanave, C. P. (1998). Transitions: The balancing acts of bilingual academics. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 7(2), 175-203.
- Chamot, A. U. (2001). The role of learning strategies in second language acquisition. In M. P. Breen (Ed.), *Learner Contributions to Language Learning: New Directions in Research*. Harlow, England: Longman, 25-43.
- Charmaz, K. (1997). Identity dilemmas of chronically ill men. In Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (Eds.), *Grounded Theory in Practice*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Charmaz, K. (2004). Grounded theory. In Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. (Eds.), *Approaches to Qualitative Research. A Reader on Theory and Practice*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 496-521.
- Cheng, X. (2000). Asian students' reticence revisited. *System* 28, 435-446.
- Chiang, Y. D., & Schmida, M. (2002). Language identity and language ownership: Linguistic conflicts of first-year university writing students. In Zamel, V., & Spack, R. (Eds.), *ENRICHING ESOL PEDAGOGY Readings and Activities for Engagement, Reflection, and Inquiry*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 393-409.
- Clark, R., & Gieve, S. N. (2006). On the discursive construction of 'the Chinese learner'. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 19(1), 54-73.

Clarke, M. A. (2002). On the nature of technique: What do we owe the gurus? In Zamel, V., & Spack, R. (Eds.), *ENRICHING ESOL PEDAGOGY* Readings and Activities for Engagement, Reflection, and Inquiry. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 253-268.

Cohen, A. D. (1998). *Strategies in Learning and Using a Second Language*. London: Longman.

Coare, P., & Thomson, A. (Ed.). (1996). *Through the Joy of Learning: Diary of 1,000 adult learners*. Leicester : National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

Cortazzi, M., & Jin, L. (1996). Cultures of learning: Language classrooms in China. In H. Coleman (Ed.), *Society and the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: CUP, 169–206.

Cortazzi, M. & Jin, L. (2013). Introduction. In Cortazzi, M. & Jin, L. (Eds.), *Researching Cultures of Learning: International Perspectives on Language Learning and Education*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 1-17.

Coughlan, S. (2011, March 10). Record numbers of international students. BBC News Business. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-12671198>

Coverdale-Jones, T., & Rastall, P. (Eds.). (2009). *Internationalising the University: The Chinese Context*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Coxhead, A. (2002). The academic word list: a corpus-based word list for academic purposes. In B. Kettemann & G. Marko (Eds.), *Teaching and Learning by Doing Corpus Analysis: Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Teaching and Language Corpora*, Graz 19-24 July, 2000. Amsterdam; New York, NY: Rodopi.

Coxhead, A & Nation, P. (2001). The specialised vocabulary of English for academic purposes. In Flowerdew, J. & Peacock, M. (Eds.), *Research Perspectives on English for Academic Purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. (2009). *Just a Phrase I'm Going Through. My Life in Language*. London: Routledge.

Denzin, Norman K., (2004). The art and politics of interpretation. In Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. (Eds.), *Approaches to Qualitative Research. A Reader on Theory and Practice*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Denzin, Norman K., & Lincoln, Yvonna S. (Eds.). (2000). *Handbook of Qualitative Research (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc.

Devlin, S., & Peacock, N. (2009). Overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers to integration: An investigation of two models. In Coverdale-Jones, T., & Rastall, P. (Eds.), *Internationalising the University: The Chinese context*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 165-184.

Dörnyei, Z. (2010). Researching motivation: from integrativeness to the ideal L2 self. In Hunston, S., & Oakey, D. (Eds.), *Introducing Applied Linguistics: Concepts and Skills*. Oxon: Routledge, 74-83.

Duff, P. A. (2008). *Case Study Research in Applied Linguistics*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Edwards, V., & Ran, A. (2009). Building on experience: Meeting the needs of Chinese students in British Higher Education. In Coverdale-Jones, T., & Rastall, P. (Eds.), *Internationalising the University: The Chinese context*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 185-205.

Ellis, R. (1997). *Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: OUP.

Feng, A. (2009). English in China: Convergence and divergence in policy and practice. *AILA Review* 22, 85-102. DOI: 10.1075/aila.22.07fen

Feng, A. (2012). Spread of English across greater China. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 33(4), 363-377. DOI: 10.1080/01434632.2012.661435

Flowerdew, J. (2002). Computer-assisted Analysis of Language Learner Diaries: A Qualitative Application of Word Frequency and Concordancing Software in Teaching and learning by doing corpus analysis, *Language and Computer*, No 42, 231-246.

Fong, Y.S. (2006a). Through a looking glass: A profile of SM3 students enrolled in an intensive English course. *STETS Language & Communication Review*, 5(1), 11-20.

Fong, Y.S. (2006b). "Don't worry a lot, dear!": Reflections of PRC ESL learners on their English language learning experience. *Reflections on English Language Teaching*, 5(2), 25-45.

Forland, H. (2006). The international student learning experience: bridging the gap between reality and rhetoric, *Going Global 2: The UK's International Education conference*, Edinburgh, 6-8 December 2006.

Fusheng, X., & Rao, Z. (2007). Making native-speaking English teachers aware of challenges and adapt themselves to EFL Teaching in China. *STETS Language & Communication Review*, 6(1), 29-33.

Gan, Z., Humphreys, G., & Hamp-Lyons, L. (2004). Understanding successful and unsuccessful EFL students in Chinese universities. *The Modern Language Journal*, 88 (ii), (2004) 0026-7902/04, 229-244.

Gao, Y., Cheng, Y., Zhao, Y., & Zhou, Y. (2005). Self-identity changes and English learning among Chinese undergraduates. *World Englishes*, 24, 39–51.

Gao, Y., Zhao, Y., Cheng, Y., & Zhou, Y. (2007). Relationship between English learning motivation types and self-identity changes among Chinese students. *TESOL QUARTERLY* 41(1), 133-55.

Gao, Y. (2009a). Sociocultural contexts and English in China: Retaining and reforming the cultural habitus. In Joseph Lo Bianco, Jane Orton & Gao Yihong (Eds.), *China and English Globalisation and the Dilemmas of Identity*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 56-78.

Gao, Y. (2009b). Language and identity: State of the art and a debate of legitimacy. In Joseph Lo Bianco, Jane Orton & Gao Yihong (Eds.), *China and English Globalisation and the Dilemmas of Identity*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 101-119.

Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. (1972). *Attitudes and Motivation in Second-Language Learning*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers.

Gardner, R.C. (2001). Integrative motivation and second language acquisition. In Dörnyei, Z. & Schmidt, R. (Eds.), *Motivation and Second Language Acquisition*. Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Center. University of Hawai'i at Manoa, 1-19.

Gieve, S., & Clark, R. (2005). 'The Chinese approach to learning': Cultural trait or situated response? The case of a self-directed learning programme. *System* 33, 261-276.

Gladwell, M. (2008). *Outliers The story of success*. London: Penguin Books

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. NY: Aldine Publishing.

- Goh, C. (1997). Metacognitive awareness and second language listeners. *ELT Journal*, 51(4), 361-369.
- Gray, J. (1998). The language learner as teacher: the use of interactive diaries in teacher training in *ELT Journal* 52(1), 29-37.
- Griffiths, D. S., Winstanley, D., & Gabriel, Y. (2005). Learning shock: The trauma of returning to formal learning. *Management Learning*, 36(3), 275-297.
- Gu, M. (2009). College English learners' discursive motivation construction in China. *System*, 37(2), 300-312.
- Gu, M. (2010a). National identity in EFL learning: A longitudinal inquiry. *Changing English*, 17(1), 57-67.
- Gu, M. M. (2010b). Identities constructed in difference: English learners in China. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 42, 139-152.
- Gu, P. Y. (2003). Fine Brush and Freehand: The vocabulary-learning art of two successful Chinese EFL learners. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37(1), Spring 2003, 1, 73-104.
- Harklau, L. (2002). ESL versus mainstream classes: Contrasting L2 learning environments. In Zamel, V., & Spack, R. (Eds.), *ENRICHING ESOL PEDAGOGY Readings and Activities for Engagement, Reflection, and Inquiry*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 127-157.
- Ho, J., & Crookall, D. (1995). Breaking with Chinese cultural traditions: Learner autonomy in English language teaching. *System*, 23(2), 235-243.
- Hoffman, E. (1989). *Lost in Translation. A Life in a New Language*. New York: Penguin Books.



Hosenfield, C. (2003). Evidence of emergent beliefs of a second language learner: A diary study in *Educational Linguistics* 2, 37-54.

Hu, G. (2002). Potential cultural resistance to pedagogical imports: The case of communicative teaching in China. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 15(2), 93-105.

Hu, G. (2003). English language teaching in China: Regional differences and contributing factors. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 24(4), pp. 290-318.

Hu, G. (2005). Basic English Language Education in China: An Overview. In Kwah, P. F. & Vallance, M. (Eds.), *Teaching English to Chinese ESL Students: Classroom Practices*. Singapore: Pearson.

Huang, Y. (2012, August). Transitioning challenges faced by Chinese students. *Adult Learning* 23(3), 138-147. DOI: 10.1177/1045159512452861

Hughes, R., & Gao, X. (2008). 'Language development in a hybrid immersion context: Work in progress findings regarding student language learning beliefs and rate of progress', International Conference on Language Issues in English-medium Universities: A Global Concern, Hong Kong, 18-20 June, 2008.

Jackson, J. (2014). *Introducing language and intercultural communication* (pp. 5-8). Oxon, UK: Routledge.

Jin, L., & Cortazzi, M. (1998). The culture the learner brings: A bridge or a barrier? In M. Byram & M. Fleming (Eds.), *Language Learning in Intercultural Perspective: Approaches through Drama and Ethnography*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 98-118.

Jin, L., & Cortazzi, M. (2001). Cultural synergy: Using Chinese strengths in EAP. Retrieved from <http://www.baleap.org.uk/pimreports/2001,shu/jincor.htm>, Sheffield Hallam University.

Jin, L., & Cortazzi, M. (2006). Changing practices in Chinese cultures of learning. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 19(1), 5-20.

Krashen, S. (2002). Theory versus practice in language training. In Zamel, V., & Spack, R. (Eds.), *ENRICHING ESOL PEDAGOGY Readings and Activities for Engagement, Reflection, and Inquiry*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 211-228.

Kwah, P. F., & Goh, C.C.M. (1996). Language learning strategies of Chinese ESL students: Language proficiency and gender. *Language and Communication Review*, 2, 12-18.

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2008). *Cultural Globalization and Language Education*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Lam, A. (2005). Language learning in China: The experience of four learners. In Deng, X. (Ed.), *Reflections on English Language Teaching 4*, 2005:1 – 14. Singapore: Centre for English Language Communication, NUS.

Lam, S. T. E. (2011). The pedagogy of a tertiary EFL teacher in the PRC. In Radhika Jaidev, Maria Luisa C. Sadorra, Wong Jock Oon, Lee Ming Cherk, Beatriz Paredes Lorente (Eds.), *Global Perspectives, Local Initiatives. Reflections and Practice in ELT*. Centre for English Language Communication, National University of Singapore. Selected Papers from the Third CELC Symposium for English Language Teachers, 195-208.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2001). Individual cognitive/affective learner contributions and differential success in second language acquisition. In M. P. Breen (Ed.), *Learner*

Contributions to Language Learning: New Directions in Research. Harlow, England: Longman, 12-24.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Lee, S. Y. (2007). *Scholarly Approach*. *The Sunday Times*, May 6, 2007, p. L9.

Leedham, M., Errey, L., & Wickens, P. (2004, November,). Conference report: 'Responding to the needs of Chinese learners in higher education', 17 and 18 July 2004, Portsmouth University, UK. In *The East Asian Learner*, 1(2), 37-39.

Li, D. (2007). *Coping with linguistic challenges in UK higher education: The use of strategies by research students*. In *Language Learning Journal*, 35(2), December 2007, 205-219.

Li, X., & Chang, S. (2001). *A positive cultural perspective on rote learning in China: An analysis of views from 100 learners of English*. BALEAP PIMS Reports – Sheffield Hallam. Retrieved December 16, 2008 from <http://www.baleap.org.uk/pimreports/2001/shu/li.htm>

Li, Y. (2007). *Apprentice scholarly writing in a community of practice: An interview of an NNES graduate student writing a research article*. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(1), 55-79.

Liang, J. (2009). *The courage to teach as a nonnative English teacher. Confession of a Christian teacher*. In Wong, M. S., & Canagarajah, S. (Eds.), *Christian and Critical English Language Educators in Dialogue. Pedagogical and Ethical Dilemmas*. New York: Routledge, 168-9.

Lilis, T., & Curry, M. J. (2010). *Academic writing in a global context: The politics and practices of publishing in English*. Oxon: Routledge.

Lo Bianco, J. (2009). Intercultural encounters and deep cultural beliefs. In Joseph Lo Bianco, Jane Orton & Gao Yihong (Eds.), *China and English Globalisation and the Dilemmas of Identity*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 23-55.

Liu, J. (2001). My writing from Chinese to English: Cultural transformation. In D. Belcher & U. Connor (Eds.), *Reflections on Multiliterate Lives*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 121- 31.

Liu, X. (2010). An investigation of Chinese university learners' knowledge about writing. *University of Reading Language Studies Working Papers*, 2, 51-63.

Liu, X. (2011, December). More than Ba Gu Wen (Eight-legged essay) and Confucianism: A new research agenda for English-Chinese writing studies. *SLW News*. The Newsletter of the Second Language Writing Interest Section. An interest section of TESOL International Association.

Lu, M. (1998). From silence to words: Writing as struggle. In Zamel, V., & Spack, R. (Eds.), *Negotiating Academic Literacies. Teaching and Learning across Cultures*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 71-83.

MacGregor, K. (2011, November 21). US: Foreign student numbers up, Americans abroad down. *University World News* (148). Retrieved from <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20101120202610779>

Matsumoto, K. (1989). An analysis of a Japanese ESL learner's diary: Factors involved in the L2 learning process. *JALT Journal*, 11(2), 167-92.

McCarthy, M., & O'Keeffe, A. (2004). *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* (2004) 24, 26-43. Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/S0267190504000029

Meenakshi, K. (2010). Chinese ELT students in India: Some reflections on the use of instructionist and learner-centred activities. *Reflections on English Language Teaching*, 9 (1), 59-68.

Miller, J., & Glassner, B. (2004). The “inside” and the “outside”: Finding realities in interviews. In Silverman, D. (Ed.), *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). London: Sage, p. 125-139.

Mitchell, M., & Myles, F. (2004). *Second Language Learning Theories* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.) London: Arnold.

Miyuki, U. (2001). Learner Development: The Usefulness of learning Diaries in learner Training in Language Teacher - Kyoto – *JALT 25*(2), 34-35.

Morita, N. (2000). Discourse socialization through oral classroom activities in a TESL graduate program. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34(2), 279-310.

Morita, N. (2004). Negotiating Participation and Identity in Second Language Academic Communities. *TESOL Quarterly* 38(4), 573-603.

Morrison, B., & Hamp-Lyons, L. (2007). Grounded Theory Research: Increasing Accountability and Credibility through the Use of the ‘Worked Example’. In *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences*, 2(3), pp. 413-424.

Mullins, G., & Kiley, M. (2002). ‘It’s a PhD, not a Nobel Prize’: how experienced examiners assess research theses. *Studies in Higher Education* 27(4), DOI: 10.1080/0307507022000011507, 369-386

Ni, Q. (2008). Traditional Chinese Culture and ELT, 43<sup>rd</sup> RELC International Seminar, *Language Teaching in a Multilingual World: Challenges and Opportunities*, Singapore, 21-23 April, 2008.

Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. London: Longman/Pearson Education.

Norton, B. (2001). Non-participation, imagined communities and the language classroom. In M. P. Breen (Ed.), *Learner Contributions to Language Learning: New Directions in Research*. Harlow, England: Longman, 159-171.

Ortiz, S. J. (2002). The language we know. In Zamel, V., & Spack, R. (Eds.), *ENRICHING ESOL PEDAGOGY Readings and Activities for Engagement, Reflection, and Inquiry*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 423-429.

Orton, J. (2009). English and the Chinese quest. In Joseph Lo Bianco, Jane Orton & Gao Yihong (Eds.), *China and English Globalisation and the Dilemmas of Identity*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, p. 79-97.

Oxford, R. (2001a). Language learning strategies. In R. Carter & D. Nunan (Eds.), *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*. Cambridge: CUP, 166-172.

Oxford, R. (2001b). 'The bleached bones of a story': learners' constructions of language teachers. In M. P. Breen (Ed.), *Learner Contributions to Language Learning: New Directions in Research*. Harlow, England: Longman, 86-111.

Phan, L. E., McPherron, P., & Phan, V. Q. (2011). English language teachers as moral guides in Vietnam and China: Maintaining and re-traditionalising morality. In Ryan, J. (Ed.), *Education Reform in China*. Routledge: Abingdon, England, 132-157.

Poole, A. (2005). Gender and academic reading strategies: A survey of adult EFL learners in Mainland China. In Berry, V. (Ed.), *Hong Kong Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 10(2), December, 2005, 38-51.

Rastall, P. (2004). The Chinese learner in higher education: Transition and quality issues. Responding to the Needs of the Chinese Learner Conference, University of Portsmouth, 16-18 July, 2004.

Rao, Z. (2001). Matching teaching styles with learning styles in East Asian contexts. The Internet TESL Journal, VII(7), July 2001. Retrieved from [http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Zhenhui-Teaching Styles.html](http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Zhenhui-Teaching%20Styles.html)

Rampton, B. (1995). Crossing: Language and ethnicity among adolescents. London and New York: Longman.

Rao, Z. (2005). Adapting the SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) to suit EFL students in a Chinese Context. In Berry, V. (Ed.), Hong Kong Journal of Applied Linguistics, 10(2), December 2005, 52-70.

Read, J. (2004). Annual Review of Applied Linguistics (2004) 24, 146-161. Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/S0267190504000078

Richards, K. (2003). Qualitative Inquiry in TESOL. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ryan, J. (2010). "The Chinese learner": Misconceptions and realities. In Ryan, J., & Slethaug, G, (Eds.). International Education and the Chinese Learner. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, HKU. Retrieved June 16, 2014, from Project MUSE database, 37-56.

Ryan, J. (2013). Comparing learning characteristics in Chinese and Anglophone cultures: Pitfalls and Insights. In Cortazzi, M. & Jin, L. (Eds.), Researching Cultures of Learning: International perspectives on language learning and education. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 41-58.

Ryan, R.M., & Deci, E.L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 25, 54–67 (2000). doi:10.1006/ceps.1999.1020, available online at <http://www.idealibrary.com>

Shi, L. (2006). The successors to Confucianism or a new generation? A questionnaire study on Chinese students' culture of learning English. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 19(1), 122-147.

Shen, F. (1998). The classroom and the wider culture: Identity as a key to learning English composition. In Zamel, V. & Spack, R. (Eds.), *Negotiating Academic Literacies. Teaching and Learning across Cultures*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 123- 133.

Slethaug, G. (2010). Something happened while nobody was looking: The growth of international education and the Chinese learner. In Ryan, J., & Slethaug, G, (Eds.). *International Education and the Chinese Learner*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, HKU. Retrieved June 16, 2014, from Project MUSE database, 15-36.

Silverman, D. (2006). *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analyzing Talk, Text, and Interaction*. (3rd ed.). London: Sage.

Smith, P. V., & Zhou, X. (2009). The dissonance between insider and outsider perspectives of the 'Chinese problem': Implications for one of UK's largest undergraduate programmes. In Coverdale-Jones, T., & Rastall, P. (Eds.), *Internationalising the University: The Chinese context*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 130-146.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research. Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.



Syed, Z. (2001). Notions of self in foreign language learning: A qualitative analysis. In Dörnyei, Z. & Schmidt, R. (Eds.), *Motivation and Second Language Acquisition*. Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Center. University of Hawai'i, 127-148.

Tan, A. (2002). Mother tongue. In Zamel, V., & Spack, R. (Eds.), *ENRICHING ESOL PEDAGOGY Readings and Activities for Engagement, Reflection, and Inquiry*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 431-436.

Teng, J. (1996). A diary study of the effectiveness of implementing language learning strategies in the acquisition of a foreign language: The diary of an autonomous learner of the Malay language. Unpublished Thesis (M.Ed.), University of Sheffield, Division of Education.

Teng, J. (2008). *Power and Identity in a Community of Literacy Practice: An Ethnography Study of Undergraduates in Singapore*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, National University of Singapore, Singapore.

Thorne, S. L., & Black, R. W. (2007). *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics (2007) 27*, 133-160. Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/S0267190508070074

Thorpe, K. (2006, August 2). Report on 'Responding to the Needs of the Chinese Learner in Higher Education: Internationalising the University'. 2<sup>nd</sup> Biennial International Conference, University of Portsmouth, 15 and 16 July 2006. Retrieved from [www.lass.soton.ac.uk/education/CLearnConfRpt.doc](http://www.lass.soton.ac.uk/education/CLearnConfRpt.doc)

Ushioda, E. (2001). Language learning at university. In Dörnyei, Z. & Schmidt, R. (Eds.), *Motivation and Second Language Acquisition*. Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Center. University of Hawai'i, 93-126.

Vandrick, S. (2002). ESL and the colonial legacy: A teacher faces her 'missionary kid' past. In Zamel, V., & Spack, R. (Eds.), *ENRICHING ESOL PEDAGOGY Readings and*

Activities for Engagement, Reflection, and Inquiry. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 411- 422.

Vickers, C., & Morgan, S. (2003). Learner Diaries. In *Modern English Teacher* 12(4), 29-34.

Vinther, J. (2010). A Danish perspective on teaching Chinese students in Europe. In Ryan, J., & Slethaug, G, (Eds.). *International Education and the Chinese Learner*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, HKU. Retrieved June 16, 2014, from Project MUSE database, 111-127.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society. The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Wachob, P. (2004). Training Chinese students to be ‘western learners’. *STETS Language & Communication Review*, 3(1), 9-18.

Wang, J. (2013). Understanding the Chinese learners from a perspective of Confucianism. In Cortazzi, M. & Jin, L. (Eds.), *Researching Cultures of Learning: International Perspectives on Language Learning and Education*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 61-79.

Wenden, A. (2001). Metacognitive knowledge in SLA: the neglected variable. In M. P. Breen (Ed.), *Learner Contributions to Language Learning: New Directions in Research*. Harlow, England: Longman, 44-64.

Williams, M., Burden, R.L., & Al-Baharna, S. (2001). Making sense of success and failure: The role of the individual in motivational theory. In Dörnyei, Z. & Schmidt, R (Eds.), *Motivation and Second Language Acquisition*. Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Center. University of Hawai’i, 172-184.

- Wolcott, H. F. (2001). *Writing Up Qualitative Research* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Wong, M. S., & Canagarajah, S. (Eds.). (2009). *Christian and Critical English Language Educators in Dialogue. Pedagogical and Ethical Dilemmas*. New York: Routledge.
- Xu, S. (2011). Bridging the East and West dichotomy: Harmonising Eastern learning with Western knowledge. In Ryan, J. (Ed.), *Education Reform in China*. Routledge: Abingdon, England, 224-242.
- Yang, R. P., Noels, K. A., & Saumure, K. D. (2006). Multiple routes to cross-cultural adaptation for international students: Mapping the paths between self-construals, English language confidence, and adjustment. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 30(4), 487-506.
- Young, C. & Fong, Y. S. (2003). Learner diaries as a tool to heighten Chinese students' metacognitive awareness of English learning. In Lee, G. L., Ho, L., Meyer, J. E. L., Varaprasad, C., & Young, C. (Eds.), *Teaching English to Students from China*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 21-34.
- Yuan, Y., & Xie, Q. (2013). Cultures of learning: An evolving concept and an expanding field. In Cortazzi, M. & Jin, L. (Eds.), *Researching Cultures of Learning: International perspectives on language learning and education*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 21-40.
- Yumuk, A. (2002). Letting go of control to the learners: The role of the Internet in promoting a more autonomous view of learning in an academic translation course in *Educational Research Sum 2002*, 44(2): 141-156.
- Zamel, V. (2002). From the margins to the center. In Zamel, V., & Spack, R. (Eds.), *ENRICHING ESOL PEDAGOGY Readings and Activities for Engagement, Reflection, and Inquiry*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 331-340.

Zhang, L. J. (2001). Exploring variability in language anxiety: Two groups of P. R. C. students learning ESL in Singapore. *RELC Journal*, 32(1), 73-91.

Zhang, L. J. (2003). Research into Chinese EFL learner strategies: Methods, findings and instructional issues. *RELC Journal*, 34(3), 284-322.

## **Appendix A: Former PRC SM Students**

### **Learning Journeys of Pre-2006 PRC SM2 or SM3 Bridging Course Students**

#### **1. ZZG (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. XJ (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. GYP (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. HSJ (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. LZR (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. HRT (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 you convenience. Please suggest us when you will be more free and let us arrange.

Best regards,  
RT

## Appendix B: Poem

### The Pipa Player by Fong Yoke Sim

Composed after attending a Singapore Chinese Orchestra Concert (1987/8)

She clasps her pipa<sup>1</sup>,  
Her embrace at once tender, tenacious.  
From her fingers are wrung, no,  
From her being,  
The tragedy of Xianglin Sao<sup>2</sup>.  
She writhes,  
She agonizes.

Can mere wood and string  
Vibrate with such pulsing  
Of the human heart?

The lyrical parts, methinks,  
Are too youthful, too light  
For one like the widow.  
Yet, isn't she human  
And feeling  
And young once?  
Like the pipa player?  
Like myself?

Why does this Chinese piece  
Stir up such thought and feeling?  
Why does every fierce thundering  
And soft caress  
Reverberate in heart and mind?  
Which the grandest of  
Western symphonies cannot do?  
Was it my acquaintance  
With LuXun's<sup>3</sup> story? Or  
The call of my blood?

My roots are Chinese  
Sprung from a seed  
Transplanted onto Singapore soil  
But my foliage is western  
Engendered by an English education.  
And it takes Xianglin Sao  
To bring to the surface  
Of my consciousness  
The twining in my soul.

<sup>1</sup>The pipa is a four stringed lute (or Chinese guitar) with a pear-shaped body. See Pipa – Chinese Lute. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.philmultic.com/pipa/>

<sup>2</sup> A music composition; the title means “Mrs Xianglin”. It is based on the character of the same name in Lu Xun’s short story, *New Year’s Sacrifice*. See <http://history.cultural-china.com/en/60History7913.html> and [http://www.chinaculture.org/gb/en\\_artqa/2003-09/24/content\\_38399.htm](http://www.chinaculture.org/gb/en_artqa/2003-09/24/content_38399.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Lu Xun. See *Lu Xun: China’s Greatest Modern Writer*. (2009). Retrieved from [http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china\\_1900\\_luxun.htm](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1900_luxun.htm)

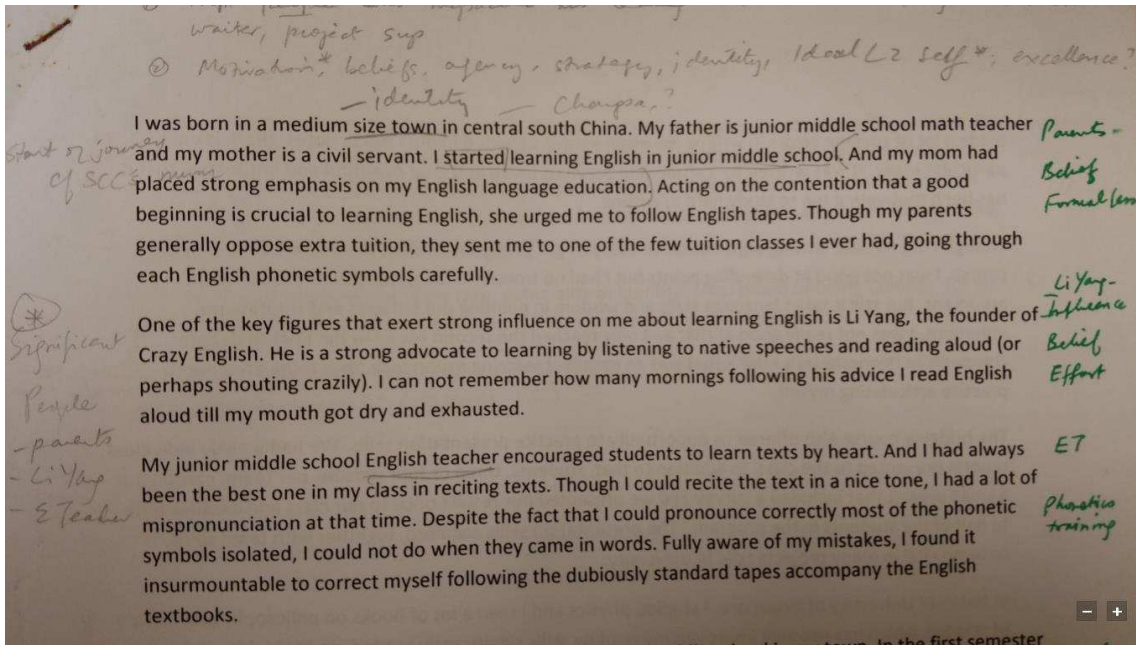
## Appendix C: Examples of Coding of Data

| Diary      | Important points/Summary   |
|------------|--|
| 1.<br>15/2 | <p>“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. When I went to the print house, I knew little about printing...But I really wanted to print my work!...After the girl in front of me finished [printing], I asked if I could borrow her cashcard. She was kind-hearted and agreed...Although my hearing [listening] was not good, I understood her meaning...I didn't know how to...I asked the person besides me, and he helped me do it...At last, I did it. Looking at the copy I wanted, I was very happy. I was proud because I did it by asking strangers for help, and in English. So <u>don't be shy</u> to speak English to strangers.”</p> <p>[motivation – desire to print a page – led to asking strangers in English; task accomplished – pride; lesson learnt – overcome shyness to speak in E to strangers]</p> <p><i>Handwritten notes:</i> L2, Task did, Strategy - soc, Motiv, Survival context, Lesson learnt - overcome shyness, Implics shy before?</p> |
| 2.<br>1/3  | <p>“A new way of learning English <u>I find that learning English is 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.</u>”</p> <p>[nature of language]</p> <p>“For example, if you are interested in science or mathematics, try to find information about it in English...That's what I did recently, and I found it <u>enjoyable and efficient</u>. I learnt a lot both in language and expertise.”</p> <p><i>Handwritten notes:</i> Title, same as Q1, Transition - understand, behavior, Strategy AD, L2 exp</p>  |

Figure C.1 Coding of Summary of SQ's Diary

|  |  |
|--|--|
| 2. If you compare your <u>learning of English to a journey</u> , how would you describe where you are now? What are your thoughts and/or feelings on arriving at this point in your learning?                | <p>I think I am <u>mid-way</u>, but <u>not very far behind from native English speakers</u>. I feel very happy and satisfied. I can still remember vividly the first few days I was learning English, how I suffered from memorizing words like "ambulance" and "umbrella" and how envious I was when I looked at those overseas Chinese on TV who could speak English fluently. Sometimes, I feel time really flies and it seems so sudden that I become one of them.</p> <p><i>Handwritten notes:</i> Ideal L2 self?, AD, rec L, Ideal L2 self, attained L2 self, Transition</p>   |
| 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*?) | <p>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. It is a very effective way to enhance oral English as well.</p> <p><i>Handwritten notes:</i> Transition, Stress, Transition, L2 exp.</p> |
| 4. Looking back on the bridging course,<br>a. what did you find most helpful? Or what was your greatest gain?  | <p>I find the <u>weekly presentations, the oral report</u>, in front of the whole class most helpful.</p> <p><i>Handwritten notes:</i> Stress on oral</p>  |
| b. what did you find most challenging? (For example, Oral Report, Essay?) How do you feel about this aspect now? Why?  | <p><i>Handwritten notes:</i> Transition</p>  |

Figure C.2 Coding of QU's Email Interview



**Figure C.3 Coding of TC's Autobiography**

## **Appendix D: TC'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 can not 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 hospitability 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 E: The Bridging Course**

To give the reader a sense of the learning context that the PRC students experienced during the 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 NUS.

### **• The Bridging Course in NUS**

For the 2006 SM3 (14<sup>th</sup> Batch) students, their BC ran for twenty-three weeks from January to June. In 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 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.

| Phase                                      | Duration  | Tests  | Major Activities  | Textbooks Used  |
|--|---|--|---|---|
| <b>Phase 1<br/>(Proficiency)</b>           | Weeks 1-11<br>(03.01.06 –<br>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> <li>▪ Grammar Review (Grammar R)</li> <li>▪ Supplementary Materials (Supp)</li> </ul> |
| Recess                                     | Week 8<br>(22.02.06 –<br>24.02.06)<br>Week 16<br>(17.04.06 –<br>21.04.06) |  |   |   |
| <b>Phase 2<br/>(Proficiency &amp; EAP)</b> | Weeks 12-23<br>20.03.06 –<br>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> |   |

**Table E.1: Summary of Course Schedule and Content**

| <b>Week 4</b>                                      |     |   |   |
|--|-----|---|---|
| <b>Theme in focus: Computer &amp; the Internet</b> |     |   |   |
| 23.01.06   | Mon | R & G Ch2/p28-50<br>Narrating: paragraph<br><b><u>As: P45-46 Do writing assignment 2: Point of View</u></b>   |   |
| 24.01.06   | Tue | The structure of an essay supp<br>p60-70<br>Grammar R: R & G Ch1/p215-<br>220<br>Dependent clauses, subordinators<br>& connecting words<br><b><u>As: Write an essay</u></b>   | Supp reading: Crying for Help on the<br>Internet<br>Digital World: a gapped text supp<br>p71-78 |
| 25.01.06   | Wed | Computer helpline (see teachers'<br>manual p16-18 for<br>dialogue/teaching procedures)<br>Pronunciation Practice (2)<br>vowels supp p79<br>Grammar R: R & G Ch2/p221-<br>227: Simple past for<br>narrating/Simple present for<br>explaining<br>Used to and would<br>Adverbial Clauses of Time | <b>MOE activities</b>   |
| 26.01.06   | Thu | T R Ch2<br>Theme: IT<br>Skill: Keeping a vocabulary log<br>Skills: Identifying a writer's audience & purpose<br>Use of figurative language<br><b><u>As: Review/Categorize voc learned in this week. Prepare for oral<br/>report</u></b>   |   |
| 27.01.06   | Fri | Internet Dilemma & Supp<br>Reading: Cyberdating<br>(supp p80-86)<br><b><u>As: Listen/read and share</u></b>   | Learning Journey 1<br>Kampong Glam<br>(Materials to be collected from OAB<br>General Office)    |

**Table E.2: Schedule for Week 4 of the 2006 SM3 Course**

- **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 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.