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## Telling ELT Tales out of School

A reading of ELT curriculum through students' stories

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### Abstract

This is a narrative inquiry into the present Curriculum for Undergraduate English majors in China, especially its objective of cultivating interdisciplinary English expertise, from students' perspective. Having been implemented for one decade, to what extent has its targets of talent cultivation been achieved? Are there any issues that need to be addressed? The students' EFL tales could also shed light to ELT in a wider context.

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*Keywords:* 2000 Curriculum; English expertise with interdisciplinary background; students' perspective; narrative inquiry ; sacred, cover, secret story.

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## 1. Introduction

Exactly a decade ago, when China was gradually and successfully stepping onto the way toward market economy and the era of globalization, increasing demands for new foreign language talents were perceived and a new Curriculum for Undergraduate English Majors was thus issued (The National Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board under the Ministry of Education, 2000) (hereafter referred to as 2000 Curriculum)<sup>2</sup>. Compared to the previous ones, a distinctive feature of the 2000 Curriculum is its new orientation for talent cultivation, that is, to cultivate English specialists with interdisciplinary backgrounds (*Fuhexing yingyu rencai*), who are supposed to obtain the following 5 qualifications:

(1) a solid foundation in integrated language skills. This is the first and foremost qualification that an English major graduate should possess.

(2) a broad range of knowledge which include knowledge in English as well as in other subjects which may involve foreign diplomacy, foreign affairs, finance, trade, law and so on.

(3) some relevant professional knowledge. This is a most direct response to the “interdisciplinary backgrounds” orientation. In another word, English major students should learn some basic knowledge of a certain field so that they can be more competitive in the labor market upon graduation.

(4) fairly good abilities, of acquiring and using knowledge, of independently analyzing and solving problems, and of creating new things. The creativeness should be attached to with special importance.

(5) good general qualities, such as being culturally and professionally moral, as well as physically and psychologically healthy. To English major students, the development of patriotism and collectivism needs particular attention.

While justifications for these qualifications have been scholarly acknowledged (see Huang, 2001; Ma, 2004), talent cultivation is but an integrated work in the interaction of language teaching and learning. Problems may emerge, addressed, and new problems reemerge again during the constant interaction. It is “a job of art” (Huang, 2001, p. 12), collaboratively completed by various stakeholders including but not limited to policy makers, teachers and students. However, due to the top-down nature of curriculum implementation, the students at the terminal of the process are prone to be overlooked. A review of publications found only 2 studies (Zhang 2007; Chang 2007) involving students in examining the effect of implementation of this curriculum. Both concluded with students’ affirmative attitudes towards the 2000 Curriculum. The conclusions are valid, but constitute only part of the story, when we regard the curriculum implementation as an ongoing interaction. In this study, I will take a narrative approach to inquire the implementation of the new talent cultivating orientation by means of looking at the experiences of four English majors registered at a normal university in China, and then give a critical discussion.

## 2. Narrative, experiences and curriculum

As a working concept, narrative inquiry is “a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of place and in social interaction with milieus” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Thus, to rethink curriculum by means of a narrative inquiry into students operationally means to bring forward students’ personal experience in the form of contextualized stories, interviews, rules, principles, images and metaphors, along with drawing on classroom observations (Clandinin & Connelly, 1987).

Since 1990s, there has been a burgeoning research interest in student experience of curriculum (for a thorough review, see Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2007). It is believed to be necessary and thus gains increasingly recognized significance when scholars in educational research notice that there are always variations in test-measured achievements, which cannot be explained by general accounts of schooling. With an emphasis on personal narrative accounts of student experience, this line of research can well fill that gap, and particularly, it boasts a strength of

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<sup>2</sup> The first curriculum nationwide for undergraduate English majors was issued in 1980, when higher education in China was resumed after the cultural revolution. At that time, it was a Curriculum for basic-level English majors. Then, a second Curriculum, which included a Curriculum for Basic-level English Majors and a Curriculum for Advanced-level English Majors, was approved by the State Education Commission consecutively in 1989 and 1990.

“present[ing] in a compelling way some aspects of student experience — those that are most salient for students in retrospect” (Erickson, et al., 2008, p. 199).

In this report, I borrowed Clandinin and Connelly’s (1996) conceptual map of “sacred, secret, and cover stories”. In an article to argue for the contextual complexity of teachers’ professional knowledge landscapes and their shaping influences on the teacher’s knowledge, Clandinin and Connelly (1996) cited three sets of stories to illustrate that the teachers’ professional knowledge landscapes usually create epistemological dilemmas that can be understood narratively in terms of sacred, secret, and cover stories. While sacred stories are the stories that demonstrate teachers’ knowledge about what they are supposed to be like and what they are supposed to do as a teacher, secret stories are what are firmly held but not voiced out directly by the teachers, due to some conflict with the sacred stories. As an alternative, teachers may adopt some cover stories to reconcile the two, that is, to express or implement secret stories in the form of sacred stories. In light of this framework, the current study attempts to explore whether the curriculum experienced by undergraduate English majors meshes with a curriculum intended by curriculum makers, if no, whether there is any dilemma existing in terms of sacred, secret, and cover stories. Sacred stories in this study are derived from the intended curriculum, specifically, the five qualifications for an English expertise with interdisciplinary backgrounds stipulated in the 2000 Curriculum.

### 3. The study

The participants in this study are four undergraduate English majors and teacher students in an educational institute in China, namely, Andrew, Harrison, Tracy and Cherry (all the names used in this article are pseudonyms; it is a common practice that Chinese students adopt a Western name for use in English classes). I went to and lived in the field twice in two successive years for the study, first time staying there about one month for a pilot study and second time, a year later, staying there about three months. Only one of the four participants presented in this paper attended my pilot study. By the time I conducted the main study, the four participants are in their third year out of a four-year BA program. All the four participants are in a same class ever since they joined this program, which means that they have been attending all the same courses. Research methods include ethnographic interviews, student journals on their English learning, in and out-of-classroom observations, and researcher’s field notes.

The study leads to two types of findings: narrative summaries of each of the participant’s life stories related to their English learning and an analytic reading across the four participants’ narrative accounts. However, due to space limitations, I will present only the second part, that is, an analytic reading across all 4 students’ stories which is framed in terms of the five qualifications defined in the Curriculum toward the development of English specialists with interdisciplinary backgrounds. Of particular interest here is how the five qualifications, which are conveyed top-down as sacred stories, are taken-up, incorporated, or resisted, and/or rejected in students’ secret and/or cover stories. The interviews and journals were conducted in English and/or Chinese, at participants’ preference. I did the translation in writing up the narrative summaries and member checked them with each participant. No major mistakes were pointed out.

#### ***Sacred story 1: As an English major, your first and foremost important task is to learn English language well.***

In the 2000 Curriculum, the training of basic language skills is repeatedly stressed — twice in the “Objectives”, once in “Course Arrangement”, a fourth time in “Teaching principles”, and still another, toward the end of the Curriculum — as the primary goal for all the teaching practices in English departments. In order to distinguish oneself as a graduate from an English department, students need to exhibit a solid foundation in basic language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation.

While this is generally acknowledged as a rule that should be and is being followed, the four participants gave quite different stories on their practices.

Andrew is, according to two of his teachers I interviewed as well as the other three student participants, the least hard-working student among the four. He himself never attempts to deny that, instead, he claims from our very first interview that:

*classmates who spend all their time in classrooms, either attending lessons or self-studying, how boring life like that is. I definitely don't want to be like that, even at the cost of doing not as well as them academically.*

In contrast, Harrison, the other male participant, was referred to, in a focus group interview, as the most hard-working student among the four. Nonetheless, I witnessed an attenuation of passion in English language learning in Harrison. The first time I talked to him, he was a sophomore, spending almost all his spare time in library reading and doing assignments; but when I went back to the field a year later, he didn't spend as much time as before on English language studies. He explained that his passion attenuated when it gradually unfolded that the chances for him to find a teaching job in the capital city were rather slim, and that his English proficiency were already good enough to be a schoolteacher back at his hometown. This well echoes his own remark made during our first interview: "To me, the biggest driving force underlying my studies is the concern for my job prospect."

A similar motivation but opposite trajectory of ELT learning was displayed in Tracy. Tracy was determined to become a teacher in her hometown city from the very first day she entered the university, preferably a secondary school teacher, and if that is beyond her reach, a primary teacher is also acceptable. To her, English language proficiency is not as important as teaching skills in secondary or primary schools, but it is important in that it is a stepping stone for her to become a teacher. She needs to enter for an entrance exam administered by the local Education Bureau in her fourth year. This results in a pickup of effort in English learning since her third year of studies.

Cherry, aiming to pursue a MA degree in English education in Great Britain upon graduation, is an ardent advocate for this sacred story. To her, there is no dispute for that. She originally wanted to go to a law school, but for some reason failed. She then gained her passion in English language learning right after she entered the university and was exposed to and fascinated by a "beautiful language" in RP (received pronunciation) in the course of English pronunciation and intonation. Throughout the years, she kept developing this passion through attending English clubs and contests, like speech contest, dubbing contest, etc. She did fail the contests on several occasions, but that would not discourage her, rather, she perceived those unsuccessful experiences as an opportunity to spot the gap between her and other contestants as well as a catalyst to catch up.

### ***Sacred story 2: You need to have a broad range of knowledge.***

The "broad range of knowledge" proposed in the 2000 Curriculum involves the knowledge related to English like literature, linguistics and cultures, and knowledge in other relevant disciplines like diplomacy, finance, law, journalism, etc. It is explicitly claimed that different foreign language colleges can have their own focus in course arrangements.

Following this sacred story, the college in which I carried out my study provides English majors with courses on American and English literature, linguistics, introduction to English-speaking countries, as well as an elective course on international trade (elective in the syllabus but instead everybody takes it). Again, students take them up in their distinctive ways.

Andrew understood "a broad range of knowledge" as a potential asset to "show off" as a teacher of English to his future secondary or primary students. Therefore in practice, what he tried to do was no more than getting to know some terminologies, literary works with the author, the main idea, and maybe the school of literature within which it falls. He would not bother to go beyond that.

To Harrison, language should not be learned only as a congregation of skills. The language learning per se is not the end, but a means of opening "a window to the outside world". In his sophomore year, he put most of his effort in grasping the language skills. Then in his third year, abandoning the effort to keep an excellent academic record so as to find a job in the capital city, he felt greater freedom to read for a broad range of knowledge, in English and/or Chinese. Thus, as an illustration, he turned out to be the only one among the four participants, who showed a great interest in the elective of international trade.

Paradoxically in Tracy, she was at the same time a "poor reader" and a "fan in literature". She claimed herself a "poor" reader because she seldom got good grades in reading comprehension tests and read very little. But the literature course was an exception. She liked literature course and in practice made great effort in previewing and reviewing the literature texts, taking initiative to find and read complementary materials, because she felt that the literature teacher liked her and so she would do everything but to disappoint the teacher.

Cherry took all the courses seriously, no matter whether she had interest or not, and finally chose linguistics as the field for her further studies. She did not read intentionally for a wide array of knowledge, but she did feel a sense

of satisfaction on gaining a broader range of knowledge as a result of her doing voluminous reading comprehension exercises in IELTS practice tests. She mentioned in her journal “rich subject matters”, and explained in a proud and interested tone in the follow-up interview: “Yeah, like Beetles, anthropology, etc, etc. In short, what you encounter in IELTS test are always beyond your imagination.”

***Sacred story 3: As a teacher student, you need to learn how to be a good teacher.***

Since this is an educational institute, most of its programs are targeted for teacher education, so is the BA English program that all the four participants are registered into. Thus, the third requirement of “some relevant professional knowledge” in the 2000 Curriculum is realized in this program by quite a proportion of educational and pedagogical courses. Some are instructed in Chinese, like ICT in teaching, education, psychology, and class management. Others are in English, like communicative language teaching, and classroom English. In addition, for each semester in the first three years, classes will be suspended for one week for students to pay school visits and make some observations. In the final year, all students are required to take a practicum in one school for two months.

For this sacred story, students reach the greatest consensus. All of them want to be a good teacher, in different degrees of expectations though. This may be associated with the larger cultural and societal context. Teaching in traditional and current mainstream Chinese culture has always been regarded as a respectable profession. A title of teacher in contemporary society is also another name for stability, which is highly valued by all the participants’ parents, and consequently, participants themselves. Because of the stability insurance, Andrew and Harrison put teaching as the top priority option despite the fact that Andrew was warned by senior in-service teachers that “Better not become a teacher if you have other choices”, and that Harrison was encouraged by his family members to go back and help run the family business, which would be “more lucrative”. The stability insurance takes Tracy and Cherry further to a determination to dedicate themselves to the profession. Apart from taking the compulsory lessons as Andrew and Harrison did, the two female participants actively engaged themselves in teaching-related activities, like entering for classroom teaching contest, taking part-time jobs as private tutors, or working as a teaching assistant. It is reported that they take great enjoyment and improvement out of those self-initiated activities, both on their own language skills and teaching skills.

***Sacred story 4: You should be independent and creative.***

Independence in acquiring and using knowledge, analyzing and solving problems, as well as creativity are two abilities that are highlighted in the 2000 Curriculum but are found missing in students’ stories.

Throughout the stories, students frequently associate learning with compulsory course attending and test taking. For instance, Andrew, when asked why he read so little extra materials other than textbooks and course-related materials, responded: “That’s we students’ job, to attend the courses we are supposed to take and obtain the certificates we are required to get”; and Harrison, when asked what did he mean by writing the phrase “be educated” in his journal, responded: “To be educated is to gain new knowledge from the teacher.” A distinct division of labor between teachers and students is thus constructed: teachers as the knowledge provider and values transmitter, while students, the knowledge receiver and test taker.

During my stay in the field, there were three instances where the concept of creativity was observed as salient. The first time in an intensive reading class, the teacher was giving a special lecture on how to prepare for the writing task in TEM Band-8, a nation-wide standardize test for senior English majors. The concept was raised in a power-point slide as the last tip to produce a high-grade writing piece: “Don’t be creative.” The second time in the warm-up of an English pedagogy class, the teacher was imparting some moral education to the students, who were about to pay a one-week school visit as a kind of practicum. The main point for the whole warm-up was: “Always remember that you are there to *be a grandson*<sup>3</sup>, don’t be unique, or creative.” No counter voice was heard during the two occasions. The *be-a-grandson* philosophy was instead well accepted and welcomed, as suggested by Tracy who sat next to me and whispered to me right on situ: “I think this is a very good warning”.

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<sup>3</sup> *Be a grandson (dang sunzi)*, a Chinese metaphoric expression which means to position yourself at a low profile and be unconditionally submissive.

The last story involving creativity was told by Cherry in an interview following up her journals. The interview was carried out several weeks after the intensive reading class that I mentioned in the first story. Cherry began to complain about the rigidity of the writing task in TEM Band-8: “It is too starched. Compared to the writing task in IELTS, it is too disturbingly starched.” She just learned about and practiced several writing tasks in IELTS and as a consequence, brought up such a complaint. She was the first person in my study who raised the issue. For all the other three participants, the non-creativity suggestion for writing was good, because it was given by a teacher who has a good reputation of teaching students to achieve high grades in TEM Band-8; and the non-creativity suggestion for working was good, because it was a value from an experienced in-service teacher, and also found to work well in their own practicing experiences.

***Sacred story 5: You should cultivate in yourself patriotism and collectivism.***

In the last qualification about general qualities, the qualities of patriotism and collectivism are proposed to be given special attention to. This is not hard to understand, since foreign language students, by being encouraged to learn not just language skills but also knowledge that is related to the language, tend to have more exposure to foreign cultures and ideologies, which might be in disagreement, or dissonance with their own ones. Evidence for such an assumption abounds in this inquiry.

First of all, classroom is a site full of conflicting ideas and ideologies. For instance, while the pedagogy teacher was advocating non-creativity and collectivism as mentioned in the previous section, the literature teacher was suggesting individualism, which was a major theme in the text of Ralph Emerson’s “Self-reliance”. Squeezed between the two value systems, Tracy’s comment, first appeared in her journal and then was confirmed in the follow-up interview, is typical among the four participants: “Individualism is an ideal situation. How lucky it would be if our society could have even one ‘Emerson’! However, ideal situation is always too far ahead of the reality. As common people, we cannot jump and live out of the real world.”

Such stories of students confronting with different cultures and ideologies continue beyond classrooms. For example, Cherry, after she lodged a complaint about the rigidity of the writing task in TEM Band-8 in an interview, further justified her point with a detailed comparison of two writing tasks in TEM Band-8 and IELTS, respectively. “In IELTS, you first of all need an argument, of your own. You can take whichever the side, as long as you can make your reasoning sound logic. In contrast, TEM is not a place for you to voice your own opinion. To be test-wise, you have to go with the stream. It is boring, but, that is the case.”

Harrison, who deemed English learning rather as a means to learn more cultures, unfolded a stronger sense of dilemma. By reading widely, for example, by reading a book on American Police System, he was surprised to find that the American police system appoints people solely on their merits. They appoint people from diverse disciplinary and personal backgrounds, which is “extremely difficult to be enforced in China”, as he observes. By seizing as many opportunities as possible to communicate with people from other cultures, such as participating in a summer project to assist a group of college students from U.S., he became aware of the great flexibility that is allowed within American higher education system, as well as the larger society. Students in the States can choose, out of their own will, to study or not to study, when to interrupt, and when to resume their studies, which is “basically impossible in China”.

#### **4. Discussions**

The student participants’ stories framed in terms of the five qualifications stipulated in 2000 Curriculum reveal some problems, both within and beyond the curriculum itself. In this section, I begin with a discussion of the problems emerging from student’s stories and then move on to a discussion of the underlying dynamics of relations and dilemmas that may contribute to the emerging of the problems.

***Within and between sacred and secret stories***

Reading through the five lines of stories, a salient feature is the blunt tension between students’ secret and correspondent sacred stories in the 4th and 5th line of stories.

While sacred story 3 of becoming a good teacher is what all the four participants are incorporated and wholeheartedly striving for, sacred story 1 of attaching the first priority to the acquisition of basic language skills is also generally acknowledged, with Andrew illustrating his good record of course attendance and success in passing the

TEM Band-4 to cover his secret but firmly held belief of the equal importance of studying and playing in his life. Sacred story 2 of acquiring a wide array of knowledge seems to be a story that is intentionally avoided. Except Harrison who deems a wider array of knowledge — especially knowledge about cultures other than his own — as his ultimate aim of English learning, all the other three participants do not take it up seriously. As a cover story, they managed to find reasonable-sounding excuses, such as the hindrance of poor vocabulary from reading extensively emphasized by Andrew and Tracy, the limited time available due to the heavy coursework, which was mentioned by all of them. On top of that, they did not forget to produce in their stories their identification with, effort in, or sympathy with the sacred story. In contrast, sacred story 4 and 5 received significantly different treatments.

No single participant took up the ability to independently acquire and use knowledge, analyze and solve problems as an important objective. In effect, resistance was suggested in Andrew's passive-learning practices alluded to, as well as in Harrison's definition of "being-educated". Contextually, the concept of creativity was taken up negatively by two teachers in the classroom. Students in response demonstrated silence, which could be interpreted as an acceptance of the submissiveness that teachers were instead advocating. Critiques did emerge in Cherry's secret story, but it remained covered in front of teachers' reinterpretation and transmission of the values in class.

Along the line of sacred story 5, there was a more straightforward tension. While language is but a value-laden product, any foreign language learning cannot be neutral phenomena, this is especially so when the 2000 Curriculum promotes a learning of English language together with a broadening of language-related subject knowledge. A case in point is the tension between collectivism, which is a philosophy in traditional Chinese wisdom, and individualism, which permeates in western literature and other forms of cultural practices. Being exposed to such a dilemma, it is interesting to find that all the four participants chose to position themselves somewhere in between without resorting to any other cover stories: they are English majors, so they have come to understand the concept of individualism in western philosophy as different from that of the Chinese counterpart, which usually connotes selfishness. Based on this knowledge, they took up the western individualism as a utopian vision; while on the other side of the coin, they were always aware of their identity as Chinese, living in a Chinese society. So it was out of dispute that they would not discard their tradition of collectivism, but instead incorporate collectivism into their daily practices. Such navigating between western and eastern discourses, from the ascribed to the chosen (Blommaert, 2005), as is evident in statements such as "Emerson's ideas are so extraordinary, but in China ..." and "We as English majors will very likely have different perspectives in looking at others' behavior, but in our own practices ...", reveals a lack of negotiability among students.

It is thus not surprising that the patriotic education proposed in sacred story 5 is largely missing in students' stories. The patriotic education promotion in 2000 Curriculum brings to the surface the critical thinking skills students need to "critically absorb the essence of diverse cultures in the world as well as to carry forward the best tradition in Chinese culture", but at the same time lays in a hegemonic way collectivism as one of the qualities to be advocated with special attention. This is an inherent contradiction in the Curriculum, which results in teachers reacting in their own idiosyncratic ways, usually explicitly advocating one while ignoring the other. As a ripple effect, the four student participants in the study, who receive divergent ideologies from both in and outside classroom interactions but who also hold the least power in the formal hierarchical classroom interactions, are kept silent in the classroom and in their secret stories unanimously resort to a dichotomization of China and western countries. "But this is impossible in China." By recurrently ending their stories about their new discovery of western countries with such a shifting-attitude remark, the four student participants construct a good-west-bad-east world. That is, everything in western countries is presented in their stories as advanced, desirable and ideal, while their counterpart in China is lag-behind, undesirable but has to be accepted. This clearly runs counter to the educative goal of cultivating patriotism among English majors, in the effort of developing English expertise with interdisciplinary backgrounds.

### ***Beyond sacred and secret stories***

In the previous section, I discussed about the tensions within and between each line of story, especially that of sacred story 4 and 5, and examined the institutional and ideological dilemma underneath. In the following discussion, I will turn to the line of sacred story 1, where the tension from within the sacred story and its correspondent secret story seems to be least intense. I will cast them into a wider sociopolitical context and examine the conceptual dilemma that comes to light from and goes beyond students' stories.

Projecting the sacred story 1, or the Curriculum as a whole, onto its historical and sociopolitical context, the 2000 Curriculum and the putting forward of English expertise with interdisciplinary backgrounds is “a result of an understanding of the new era and a survey of the labor market” (Huang, 2001) in the 21st century China. Both the market economy and the labor market call for more than pure language expertise, what they more exactly and urgently need are integrated talents who are trained with both foreign language skills and other relevant subject knowledge, such as foreign affairs, economics and trade, law and journalism. Therefore, the cultivation of English expertise with interdisciplinary background is the response to “a request to English departments by both the socialist market economy, and the new era” (see 2000 Curriculum). All the students registered into an English program are subject to this request.

However, as the inquiry reveals, although all the four participants accept that English language learning is a major task in their college life, they have quite different secret stories and practices in terms of their learning. The nature of English language learning shifts as their subject position shifts. Take Tracy as an illustration. Learning the English language in the first two years of her college life was largely a task to fulfill as a student, just like any other majors in college. As a Chinese student, she was fully aware of the traditional societal expectation upon her within the Chinese culture: the academic studies in your major should always come first. Although she “didn’t work hard” as she herself claimed, she never tried to defend herself by questioning this subject position. As a matter of fact, she said at our very first interview: “I had never experienced the taste of being a bad student until I entered college”. She identified herself as “a bad student” because of her poor academic records in the earlier phase of her college. This self-identification did not bother her much until her third year in the college, when she realized that it would become a direct threat to her more desirable self-identification as a promising teacher of English. A pickup of effort in English language learning was thus found in Tracy in her third year, in order to pass the entrance exam to be recruited as a teacher. The situation is further complicated by her subject position as a female student in college, and an eldest daughter at home. As a female student, she is quite sensitive to teachers’ personality and teaching styles. She thus tries all her best to work hard and work well on courses of English literature and of American literature, just because she felt that the female teacher of the both courses liked her. Another case in sharp contrast is her lethargy in pedagogy course, the male tutor of which, it seemed to her, did not like her. Her feelings toward the teachers were immediately questioned by me as a classroom observer and later on disconfirmed in my interview with the two teachers, and her corresponding motivation or lack of motivation thus turns out to be unsound. However, the effects have already taken shape in her English learning practices and even when I suggested to her the teachers’ words, especially the male pedagogic teacher’s really positive comment on her, Tracy would not relinquish her own belief easily. A similar impact was discerned from Tracy’s subject position as the eldest daughter at home. Her parents received very little education and are working in a private factory, which is regarded as an ill-paid, ill-respected job. She has a younger sister, whom all her family members deem not promising in academic studies. She thus bears a tremendous stress to pass the entrance exam and obtain a teaching position upon graduation so that she would not let her family members down, or lose their face.

With the above discussion of Tracy’s English language learning story, two conceptual questions came to surface: what does it mean to be an English major in China? What does it mean to learn English as an English major?

The 2000 Curriculum situates English majors beyond a classroom or school setting. It instead explicitly directs its talent cultivation objective to the needs derived from the international trend of globalization and informationization and the national development of market economy. This is an update to the previous Curriculum, which deserves recognition. However, studying from students’ perspective, the student’s versified narrative stories contrastively and negatively foreground the essentialism in the nature of the curriculum. By articulating the objective of cultivating English expertise with interdisciplinary backgrounds, the 2000 Curriculum recognizes and makes it overwhelmingly dominant the discourse of globalization. All English major students in China are supposed to be subject to this discourse. This seems to be too simplified, given the multiple social identities and subject positions that are found in students’ stories. As Lewis and Fabos (2005, p. 495) argued in discussing the relationship between literacy and identity through an examination of seven youths using instant messages, “ways of knowing and ways of being are interrelated. Epistemologies and pedagogies intersect to produce available subject positions for students to take up.” This is a similar case with the present inquiry. Students’ ways of learning English are closely interrelated with their senses of who they were, who they are, and who they are expected to be within and across different discourses. English language learning thus is not just skills or knowledge acquisition, but also students’



taking up some social positions and ignoring some others, as well as their performances (Butler, 1990) of the taken-up social identity or identities. The notion of English majors, following this argument, is not a homogeneous category but a “matrix of individualization” (Foucault, 1982, p. 783).

The idea of “matrix of individualization” originates from Foucault’s (1982) argument of modern state “not as an entity that was developed above individuals, ignoring what they are and even their very existence, but on the contrary, as a very sophisticated structure in which individuals can be integrated, under one condition: that this individual would be shaped in a new form, and submitted to a set of very specific patterns” (p. 783). Here, I want to make an analogy and argue that the notion of English majors in China can also be conceptualized as a matrix of individualization, given the evidence illustrated in this paper. Every student is a unique existence that is submitted to a set of very specific patterns. However, this individualization is largely ignored both in the 2000 Curriculum discourse, and in the implementation of the Curriculum. Students thus are trapped in the dilemma between the Curriculum’s conceptualization of English majors as a categorical subject and their own conceptualization of themselves as individualized English major. The more attrition the two conceptualizations have, the less advantageous the student is in his/her learning of the English language.

While critiquing the missing of individualization in the 2000 Curriculum, I also need to bring up the caveat against going to the opposite extreme, that is, any individual goes. This is inspired by Li’s (2009) Daoist perspective on internationalizing curriculum, which draws one’s attention to the political importance of respecting and including distinctive national and regional settings in the process of globalization and promote a balance by calling for more integration of diverging movements of resistance and hybridation into the converging force of colonization. Li (2009) elaborates that the Daoist moving toward the opposite does not mean moving to arrive at the opposite. It is rather movements around a sphere, with a dynamic balance maintained. Drawing back to the 2000 Syllabus under investigation, I do not mean to totally turn over or replace the essentialist conceptualization of English majors in China. That is practically not workable. Indeed, I suggest taking the curriculum as a sphere. While the essentialist treatment of students concerned has gone too far and broken the sphere, a call for and integration of individualization thus shall be put on agenda for a balance of the sphere.

## **5. Summary**

In this study, I inquired four Chinese English majors’ experiences of English language learning, and then, following Clandinin and Connelly’s (1996) map of sacred, secret and cover stories, explored various instances of manifestation framed in terms of the five qualifications for an English expertise with interdisciplinary backgrounds stipulated in the 2000 Curriculum. The findings show that the four student participants wholeheartedly identify with and strive for the third qualification requirement, in their case, to become a good teacher of English; generally acknowledge the first requirement to attach the first priority to the acquisition of basic English language skills, in different degrees though; intentionally avoid the third requirement to acquire a wide array of knowledge; encounter conflicting values and standpoints from different teachers in terms of the fourth requirement to be independent and creative; and demonstrate no awareness of patriotism, but on the contrary, tend to construct and resort to an oversimplified good-west-bad-China dichotomy.

Furthermore, the map is just the map; it is a tool but not the end. In the following discussions, I examined the dynamics of the relations between students’ learning landscapes and their learning practices. I discussed the dynamics of relations within, between and beyond the five lines of sacred, secret and cover stories, and argued that English majors in China are caught in institutional, ideological, as well as conceptual dilemma. As a complete and isolated discourse, the 2000 Curriculum is conflicting ideologically within itself in some aspects, such as the encouragement of students to develop creativity in sacred story 4 and to embrace collectivism in sacred story 5. During its implementation, the curriculum, teachers and students constitute an institutional hierarchy, with students at the lowest position to wield their agency. A common reaction of the student participants in this study is to play on the safe side, to navigate between the ascribed, by curriculum and/or by teachers, and the chosen, by themselves, without much critical thinking. Such deconstructing of the notion of English expertise with interdisciplinary backgrounds reveals its deeply problematic aspects, that is, its essentialist conceptualization of undergraduate English majors in China and thus the ignorance or denial of divergent social identities and performances among this group of subjects. The essentialist and inherently hegemonic nature of the curriculum marginalized those who do not conform to the ascribed discourse of learning English to meet the needs in this globalizing market economy society.

Educational authorities, in making policies and curriculum guidelines to meet the social needs and respond to changes, are inclined to impose them on practice. In so doing, they assume that the theories, principles and ideologies in the curriculum automatically translate into the teachers' enactment of the curriculum in classrooms and, thereby, into the students' achieved curriculum (for the concepts of intended, enacted and achieved curriculum, see Anderson-Levitt, 2008). The present study clearly shows that to more closely relate ideas about English language learning in contemporary China with the students' practice of English learning, we need to be concerned not only with what is expected in the construction of curriculum guidelines, but also with the more concrete landscapes of individual students' learning.

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