

THE LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND  
BELIEFS OF CHINESE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH  
AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**The Language Learning Experiences and Beliefs of Chinese Teachers of English as  
a Foreign Language**

by

Zhen Zeng

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### **Abstract**

This study explored the Language Learning Experiences (LLEs) and beliefs of six non-native speaking (NNS), English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in China and looked for congruencies and incongruencies between the experiences and beliefs. Data collection involved an online questionnaire, an asynchronous focus group as well as individual online interviews over a two-month period. Interpretation of the findings relied on a grounded theory approach. Findings from both within and cross-case analyses highlighted tensions in teachers' LLEs, beliefs and in the connections between the two constructs. Four subcategories defining this core category are as follows: 1) high motivation and learner autonomy versus low confidence; 2) language experience versus lack of access to authentic materials and native-speakers; 3) communication and meaning versus grammar and accuracy; 4) personal versus national goals. The study concludes with implications for second language/EFL teaching and learning as well as for teacher education.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

For language teachers, bound up in their personal histories and real-life experiences are their experiences as language learners. These learning experiences influence their teaching by providing them with insights that feed into their teaching practice (Sakui, 2002). Some studies (e.g. Bailey et al., 1996; Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000) have found that pre-service/novice second/foreign language teachers' past language learning histories in school largely shape their beliefs concerning second/foreign language teaching and learning. Additionally, Little and Sanders (1992) note that "a planned language learning experience can be a significant part of teacher education as well as a valuable means of professional development" (p.1).

Having been in classrooms for years as students, teachers have internalized many beliefs, values, and practices of their teachers through what Lortie (1975) refers to as "apprenticeship of observation". For most teachers, such apprenticeship encompasses two types of memories: memories of themselves as students and those of their former teachers (Johnson, 1999). In terms of the former, the memories may remind them of how students were expected to talk and act in the classroom. Teachers' memories of their former teachers, on the other hand, include "what these teachers did and said and how they approached teaching and learning" (p.19). Freeman (1991) argues that these experiences and memories leave indelible imprints on teachers' pre-existing beliefs. These experiences and memories that serve as guides for teachers when they approach

what they do in the classroom are “tremendously difficult to shake” (Kennedy, 1990, p.17).

Over the last 15 years, the concept of belief has gained considerable attention, and research into the area has taken many directions in several key areas of interest to ELT (English Language Teaching) professionals (Borg, 2001). This research ranges broadly from investigations of language learners’ beliefs (e.g. Carter, 1999; Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Horwitz, 1988, 1999), language teachers’ beliefs (e.g. Bailey et al., 1996; Johnson, 1999), a comparison between the two groups (e.g. Kern, 1995; Kuntz, 1997; Peacock, 1999), to the explorations of relationship of teachers’ beliefs and their teaching practice (e.g. Borg, 1998; Kagan, 1992; Kennedy, 1996; Raymond, 1997; Woods, 1996). An additional area of research has focused on the influence of teachers’ pre-existing beliefs on both pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes (e.g. Brown & MaGannon, 1998; Harrington & Hertel, 2000; Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Peacock, 2001; Richardson, 1996).

Undoubtedly, the study of teachers’ beliefs has “the potential to provide significant and profound insight into many aspects of the teacher’s professional world” (Murphy, 2000, p.70). Pajares (1992) calls for the attention to teachers’ beliefs which are essential to improving teachers’ classroom practices and professional preparation. Kagan (1992) highlights the value of teachers’ beliefs by stating that they lie at the very heart of teaching. She believes that to explore and understand teachers’ beliefs is “instrumental in determining the quality of interaction one finds among teachers in a given school” (p.85). Kennedy (1996) also remarks on the importance of teachers’ beliefs in that real and

effective change in teachers' practices can only occur through a change in their beliefs. Likewise, Johnson (1999) sees teachers' beliefs as having "a filtering effect on everything that teachers think about, say, and do in classrooms" (p.30). Pintrich (1990) concludes that beliefs ultimately will prove the most valuable psychological construct in teacher education.

While few would deny the importance of teachers' beliefs, they are inextricably complex (Johnson, 1999; Pajares, 1992). Donaghue (2003) posits that teachers' beliefs are hard to elicit and the difficulty partly "lies in the fact that personal theories may be subconscious" (p.345). Further contributing to the complication and difficulty of studying teachers' beliefs might be the fact that researchers hold different views of the source and origin of teachers' beliefs (Bodur, 2003). However, "as a belief substructure that interrelates with all other beliefs" (Johnson, 1999, p.30), teachers' beliefs are inseparable from their personal experiences and personalities (Donaghue, 2003).

In spite of the recognition of this experiential and subjective nature of teachers' beliefs, there is a lack of studies that aim to understand teachers' personal experiences and how those experiences have connected to their beliefs. A number of studies examining pre-service teachers' pre-existing beliefs identified how teachers' prior in-class learning experiences influenced their beliefs (e.g. Armaline & Hoover, 1989; Brown & McGannon, 1998; Horwitz, 1985; Johnson, 1994; Tillema, 1995). However, few empirical studies have focused on in-service/practising teachers (Peacock, 2001). As well, although teachers' language learning as a component in teacher education or professional development is advocated by some researchers (e.g. Bailey, Curtis & Nunan,

2001; Little & Sanders, 1992), none of the studies regard the experiences as a part of teachers' overall personal language learning histories, nor do they aim to understand how such experiences connect or disconnect to teachers' beliefs.

Most importantly, learning experiences, and language learning experiences in particular, do not always take place in the classrooms (Johnson, 1999). It is possible that language learners have informal language learning experiences in real social situations (Johnson, 1999) or through 'self-access learning' which enables them to autonomously plan their own learning activities and obtain learning materials (Gardner & Miller, 1999). Therefore, it may be misleading to refer to language teachers' personal language learning experiences merely as those gained under formal classroom instruction. While some current literature focuses on the influence of teachers' prior in-class language learning experiences on their beliefs (e.g. Johnson, 1994; Bailey et al., 1996), teachers' language learning experiences gained otherwise are largely overlooked.

This study aims to overcome the lack of attention in the research to the varied influences on teachers' beliefs. The purpose of this study is to explore and gain insight into the congruencies and incongruencies between the personal language learning experiences and beliefs of English as a foreign-language (EFL) teachers' in China. The study is premised on a definition of such learning experiences that emphasizes their continuous and complex nature. The next section of this chapter will present and detail the related problem. The study's purpose as well as the research objectives will be outlined. An overview of the study is provided. Finally, an examination of the significance of this study as well as its limitations will conclude this chapter.

### *Statement of the Problem*

The study of teachers' beliefs is not new. Interest in the nature of beliefs and their influence on people's actions began prior to the 1920's (Thompson, 1992). Kagan (1992) asserts that the beliefs teachers hold lie at the heart of teaching and influence teachers' perceptions and judgements, which, in turn, affect teachers' behaviour in the classroom. Richardson (1996) and Allen (2002) maintain that teachers' beliefs are the focus of educational change. As Allen notes, "they influence the way teachers approach professional development, what they learn from it and how they incorporate new instructional practices into their teaching" (p. 520).

However, in spite of their importance, teachers' beliefs are difficult to study. Nespor (1987) remarks that still very little is known about the origin, formulation and change of teachers' beliefs. According to Pajares (1992), belief, as a construct, was seen as the proper concern of philosophy or religion because it did not lend itself easily to empirical examination. Donaghue (2003) explains the difficulty in eliciting teachers' beliefs, which lies in: first, the subconsciousness of personal theories; second, teachers' inability to articulate them; and third, the difference between 'espoused theory' and 'theory in action'.

The term teachers' beliefs is not used consistently in relevant literature (Kagan, 1992). Such notions as teachers' "principle of practice, personal epistemologies, perspectives, practical knowledge, or orientation" (Kagan, 1992, p.66) might be referred to in relation to teachers' beliefs. Adding to the definitional confusion is the distinction between knowledge and belief (Pajares, 1992). As Allen (2002) argues, "it is difficult to

pinpoint where knowledge ends and beliefs begin” (p.519). While knowledge is commonly defined as ‘justified true beliefs’ (Fenstermacher, 1994), beliefs can be seen as a personal form of knowledge (Kagan, 1992). Kagan (1992) concludes further that most of a teacher’s professional knowledge therefore can be regarded more accurately as beliefs.

Although much of the research has frequently been concerned with understanding the important influences of teachers’ beliefs on their practice (Murphy, 2000), still little is known about how beliefs come into being (Nespor, 1987). Indeed, despite of some recognition of the experiential and subjective nature of teachers’ beliefs (e.g. Donaghue, 2003; Pajares, 1992), a problem exists in the related literature due to the lack of attention to teachers’ personal life experiences in relation to their beliefs. An increased interest in teacher development has resulted in research on the influence of teachers’ pre-existing beliefs on teacher education programs (Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000). Consequently, teachers’ prior experiences as students, i.e., their ‘apprenticeship of observation’, are gaining more attention as they relate to pre-service/novice teachers’ prior beliefs (Borg, 2004).

As Johnson (1999) states, teachers’ memories of their days as students may include a repertoire of teaching strategies, assumptions about how students learn and a bias toward certain types of instructional materials. Bailey et al. (1996) investigated how seven pre-service language teachers’ apprenticeship of observation would affect their personal beliefs and practice. The authors found that teachers’ learning experiences not only influenced their criteria for judging things like successful or unsuccessful language

learning, but also strongly influenced the way they taught. Freeman (1994) notes that the teaching methods as well as contents used in teacher education programs influence teachers' teaching practice. Brown and McGannon (1998) reached similar conclusions in their study although their research participants were beginning teachers instead of pre-service teachers.

Labaree (2000) suggests that teachers' beliefs, which are shaped largely by their 'apprenticeship of observation', are rather ungrounded and problematic. Students spend time in the classroom learning subjects instead of observing their teachers. Although students can know a lot about what teachers do, they may not know why they do it. Pre-service/novice teachers, led by such pre-existing beliefs, would thus most probably revert to their default model which leads teachers to teach as they were taught (Borg, 2004). However, as most pertinent studies focused on pre-service teachers, little attention has been accorded to in-service or even experienced teachers' beliefs (Peacock, 2001). This is surprising if we subscribe to Kennedy's (1990) findings that pre-service/novice teachers' beliefs, which are influenced by their personal language learning experiences, are tremendously difficult to shake and even make teacher education programs have a rather weak effect (Borg, 2004).

Much of the research equates "apprenticeship of observation" with teachers' personal learning experiences. This approach may be problematic. As learning does not always occur in the classrooms (Johnson, 1999), language students' observation of their teachers' behavior does not necessarily constitute all their experiences of language

learning. Other language learning experiences which are gained beyond schooling may exist as well.

Johnson (1999) argues that most language teachers have both formal and informal language learning experiences and those experiences can have a powerful impact on their beliefs. However, “this in itself can create conflicting beliefs” (p.34) for language teachers because they may have few concrete models of how to recreate their more positive informal language learning experiences for their own students in their own classrooms. Unfortunately, no further empirical research has been done to further test her position within either English as a second-language (ESL) contexts or EFL contexts.

Added to the problem is the lack of attention to the continuing nature of language teachers’ language learning experiences. Graney (2000) points out that the various experiences which language teachers hold can be examined from different perspectives: from the perspectives of teachers themselves as students in the school system, as second/foreign language learners and as language teachers in professional development as well.

Both language teachers’ ‘apprenticeship of observation’ and their language learning experiences in teacher education programs have received attention in relevant studies. Unfortunately, the two different aspects of language teachers’ personal learning were explored separately. None of the studies regards teachers’ personal language learning experiences as inseparable continua which were accumulated from the first day teachers approached the target language and continued as they underwent professional development.

Finally, compared to the large amount of literature about native speaking (NS) ESL teachers' beliefs or personal language learning experiences in western countries, there are far fewer studies in pertinent research domains of nonnative speaking (NNS) EFL teachers. As there are a large number of NNS language teachers around the world, they "face different challenges than do those teachers whose subject matter is their own first language" (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 2001, p.111). Given the different social-cultural backgrounds in which they learn and teach the target language, NNS EFL professionals are unlikely to share the same personal experiences and implicit theories with NS ESL teachers. China, being one of the leading sources of immigrants to North America in recent years, is a country which has a large number of NNS EFL teachers. The lack of attention to this group may not only cause a failure to further understand current practice in TESOL (teachers of English to speakers of other languages), but also develop a gap in understanding and educating Chinese immigrants in those countries.

In 1999, an action plan for vitalizing education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century was documented by the Ministry of Education in the People's Republic of China. One of the key components in the plan addresses the urgent need for professional development for in-service teacher education, which would have an impact on millions of teachers of English and students learning English in China (Cheng & Wang, 2004). However, most of the research (e.g. Liao, 2004; Yu, 2001; Wu, 2001) is more concerned with the pedagogical domain. The investigation of teachers' implicit cognition and their personal experiences has seldom been paid attention to. For this reason, little is known about the

beliefs of NNS teachers of EFL in China or about how their own experiences as language learners connect or disconnect with their beliefs.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study is to explore and gain insight into the personal language learning experiences and beliefs of EFL teachers' in China.

#### *Research Objectives*

- 1) Identify and describe the language learning experiences of a group of NNS EFL teachers in China.
- 2) Identify and describe the beliefs of the group of Chinese NNS EFL teachers about teaching and learning the target language.
- 3) Identify and describe the congruencies and incongruencies between the group of NNS EFL teachers' personal language learning experiences and their beliefs.

Inquiry into teachers' language learning experiences represents a means to further understand teachers' beliefs, practices and professional development (Johnson & Golombek, 2002). The first objective thus seeks to understand and explore specifically the personal language learning experiences held by NNS language teachers. As Murphy (2000) notes, teachers' beliefs represent not only teachers' personal knowledge but also their implicit theories; they "serve as cognitive and affective maps which they have evolved and which guide them in their daily interactions in their environment" (p.17). The second objective therefore aims to identify the range of different beliefs held by NNS

teachers in relation to teaching and learning EFL in China. The third objective focuses on the congruencies of “language teachers’ beliefs” and their personal “language learning experiences”. How do the NNS EFL teachers’ language learning experiences connect or disconnect with their beliefs about teaching and learning EFL in China?

### *Significance of the Study*

The study provides a contribution to the literature in terms of its definitional inclusiveness of language teachers’ personal language learning experiences. Although previous studies have explored some aspects of such experiences, none have considered them as continuous and inclusive of various types of experiences. By regarding teacher learning as lifelong and inclusive, this study provides a more holistic picture of teachers’ language learning experiences which are examined from different perspectives: as language students in classrooms, as language learners beyond school or/and in other social contexts, as practicing language teachers and as language teachers in professional development.

As well, this study is significant because it brings together two very important concepts. Compared to past studies on related topics, the present research focuses, not only on language teachers’ beliefs but also on their personal language learning experiences. Rather than investigating how teachers’ beliefs impact on practice, the study explores the congruencies and incongruencies between language learning experiences and teachers’ beliefs about language teaching and learning. Additionally, since participant teachers are either practicing or in-service teachers instead of pre-service

teachers, the study fills a gap in the research which has tended to focus on pre-service teachers.

The knowledge gained in this study will provide new insights into ways of fostering teacher development programs. The choice of China as the site of the study is important and timely as well. This is due, not only to the lack of related studies in China, but also to the increasing number of Chinese immigrants to North America in recent years. The exploration of Chinese NNS EFL teachers' experiences and implicit theories will shed light on understanding and educating Chinese EFL learners and immigrants in those countries.

A further contribution of the study relates to its methodology. This multiple case study is comprised of three phases of data collection all conducted online. This reliance on technology supports various types of conversations and discussions. It is well-suited to providing teachers with an opportunity to reflect on their own language learning histories and experiences as well as to share and articulate their implicit theories more critically.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

Due to the nature of beliefs, it is possible that some beliefs exist that teachers will not articulate "either because they did not have the vocabulary to do so, because the beliefs were not at a level of consciousness where teachers could recognize them, or because, simply, the teachers chose not to reveal them" (Murphy, 2000, p.21).

The study is focused on NNS EFL teachers. No ESL or NS teachers are included. There are, no doubt, many beliefs or/and personal language learning experiences that are

held differently by ESL and EFL as well as NS and NNS teachers. Moreover, the study is limited to teachers in China only and, because the teacher participants are all from the university level, the study is confined to higher education.

It is in recognition of the complex nature of beliefs that the study does not seek to identify causes or correlations between language learning experiences and beliefs. Instead, the objectives refer to incongruities and congruencies, connections or disconnections instead of to relationships or influences.

### *Overview of the Study*

This study aims to explore beliefs held by a group of Chinese NNS EFL teachers and how those beliefs disconnect or connect with their personal language learning experiences. Data collected consists of both focus group and individual interviews with participant teachers as well as use of an online questionnaire. Teacher talk is privileged in this study as a means of inquiring into teachers' experiences and eliciting teachers' beliefs. The interpretation of the data relies on grounded theory to look for properties and categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that might be either common to both language learning experiences and beliefs or unique to one or the other. A grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) allows "the theory to emerge from the data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.12). The approach is "most commonly used to generate theory where little is already known" (Goulding, 2002, p.42), which therefore serves the needs of the current study as little is known about the phenomena under study. The following paragraphs outline the structure of the study as a whole.

Chapter 2 presents a conceptual framework to assist in understanding the study's two main concepts. As no one definition was uncovered related to teachers' language learning experiences, the conceptual framework focuses mainly on the review of the nature and importance of the construct. As well, it examines the nature and origin of teachers' beliefs to assist in understanding the underlying assumptions behind the study's research questions. As well, a definition of the two concepts that will be relied on in this study is provided. Chapter 3 provides a review of the literature on studies similar to the one being conducted here. Chapter 4 outlines the research methodology used to investigate the research questions.

Chapter 5 presents the findings in a descriptive format. Excerpts from the questionnaire, the asynchronous focus group and individual interviews are presented in order to illustrate teachers' beliefs as well as their various language learning experiences. The excerpts are grouped so as to provide profiles for each of the cases. Chapter 6 presents an interpretation of the findings. The data are analyzed both within-cases and across-cases. Finally, conclusions and implications are presented.

### *Summary*

Over the last 15 years, the concept of belief has gained considerable attention in several key areas of interest to ELT professionals. However, in spite of the recognition of the experiential and subjective nature of teachers' beliefs, there is a lack of studies that aim to understand in-service or practicing teachers' personal experiences and how those experiences connect or disconnect with their beliefs. For language teachers, in particular,

bound up in their real-life experiences are their personal experiences as language learners. These experiences, however, do not always take place in the classrooms. Besides teachers' "apprenticeship of observation", which has been the focus of many studies, it is possible that teachers have informal language learning experiences in real social situations or through autonomous learning. Moreover, compared to a large amount of literature about NS ESL teachers' beliefs or personal language learning experiences in western countries, there are far fewer studies in pertinent research domains of NNS EFL teachers. China, being one of the leading sources of immigrants to North America in recent years, is a country which has a large number of NNS EFL teachers. However, little is known about the large group of NNS teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning EFL or their own experiences as language learners. Nor has any attention been paid to the connections or disconnections between the two constructs.

The purpose of this study is to explore and gain insight into EFL teachers' personal language learning experiences and their beliefs about EFL teaching and learning. A multiple case study was conducted with a group of practicing or in-service EFL teachers in a Chinese university. Three research objectives guided the study: 1) Identify and describe the language learning experiences of a group of NNS EFL teachers in China; 2) Identify and describe the beliefs of the group of NNS EFL teachers about teaching and learning the target language; 3) Identify and describe the congruencies and incongruencies between the group of NNS EFL teachers' personal language learning experiences and their beliefs.

The study is premised on a definition of language learning experiences that emphasizes the importance and value of teachers' personal, continuing and complex language learning. It brings together two very important concepts of teachers' language learning experiences and their beliefs. All data were collected through use of electronic tools in an online environment. Data collection techniques included an online questionnaire, an asynchronous online focus group, as well as email-based asynchronous interviews.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Conceptual Framework

#### *Introduction*

The purpose of this chapter is to establish a conceptual framework to assist in understanding the two main concepts of the study: teachers' language learning experiences and their beliefs. In terms of the former, as no one definition was uncovered, the framework will focus mainly on the review of its nature and importance. Meanwhile, the nature and origin of teachers' beliefs will also be examined to assist in understanding the underlying assumptions behind the study's research questions.

#### *Language Learning Experiences*

Teachers' knowledge, such as what they know, how they think about and practice their teaching, is internal to the teacher and largely experiential (Elbaz, 1983). Teachers acquire knowledge and develop their own ways of thinking, "beginning with an apprenticeship of observation during their own student experiences, and continuing through the constructing and reconstructing of experiences as teachers" (Graney, 2000, ¶2). This view of teachers' knowledge highlights teachers' personal experiences. Oprandy (1999) emphasizes the importance of making personal connections to language teaching. He argues that "exploring oneself and relating life experience to teaching round out our approach to language-teaching awareness" (p.122). Likewise, Bailey, Curtis and Nunan (2001) posit that language teachers' personal experiences are essential. Moreover,

they acknowledge the importance of ESL/EFL teachers' own language learning experiences when they note that "we firmly believe that examining our own language learning histories...is a valuable exercise in developing self-awareness" (p.55).

In spite of the fact that language teachers' own language learning experiences can be of much value, they have not received much attention from researchers. Nor has any general accepted definition of the construct been achieved. The literature about language teachers' own language learning tends to focus either on their past experiences as classroom students or on their language learning in teacher education programs. Few studies, unfortunately, have provided a detailed and holistic picture of ESL/EFL teachers' personal language learning experiences as a continuous one.

Indeed, language teachers' language learning experiences are continuous and accumulative. It seems to be particularly so when NNS language teachers are concerned as the subject matter they learn and therefore teach is not their own first language. Graney (2000) highlighted the continuous and accumulative nature of language teachers' language learning experiences. He points out that the various experiences that language teachers hold can be examined from different perspectives: from the perspectives of teachers themselves as students in the school system, as second/foreign language learners and as language teachers in professional development as well.

Lortie (1975) refers to teachers' own learning experiences as 'apprenticeship of observation'. He argues that much of what teachers know about teaching comes from their years of experiences as students in classrooms watching and imitating their teachers' work. Therefore, teachers' memories of their former teachers and how those teachers

approached their teaching practice in classrooms largely make up the apprenticeship. He and some of his followers (e.g. Buchmann, 1987; Kennedy, 1999) posit that such memories and experiences enable teachers to function immediately in the classroom. Grossman (1990) points out that prospective teachers' prior schooling experiences provide them with memories of strategies for teaching. Also, teachers rely on their memories as pupils to help shape their own expectations of their pupils. Likewise, the importance of teachers' 'apprenticeship of observation' is highlighted by Johnson (1999). According to her, teachers' memories as students and of their former teachers form the "basis of teachers' initial images" of themselves, "formulate the foundation" of teachers' reasoning, and act "as the justifications" for their teaching practices (p.19).

Acknowledging the power 'apprenticeship of observation' brings to teachers, Johnson (1999) notes that the imprint of teachers' past memories and experiences as students may be difficult to overcome and therefore may "tend to support a conservatism in teaching" (p.19). Kennedy (1990) draws a similar conclusion when he states that "teachers acquire seemingly indelible imprints from their own experiences as students and these imprints are tremendously difficult to shake" (p.17). Borg (2004) also found that teacher education had a weak effect on student teachers due to the highly influential period of observation. As Borg points out, teachers' apprenticeship of observation is "largely responsible for many of the preconceptions that pre-service teachers hold about teaching" (p.1). Therefore, "schooling was believed to have more of an influence on teacher's classroom practices than any formal knowledge acquired during methods courses or student teaching" (Harrington & Hertel, 2000, p.5). Feiman-Nesmer and

Buchmann (1985) finally argue that novice teachers need to “appreciate how their personal history and experience of schooling influence their perceptions of classrooms in a way that makes it difficult to see alternatives” (p.63).

Many researchers have focused on teachers’ ‘apprenticeship of observation’ and have largely equated the concept with the construct of prior learning experiences. However, teacher learning, and ESL/EFL teachers’ language learning in particular, does not always occur in the classroom and thus cannot simply mean watching or imitating teachers’ work. ESL/EFL teachers accumulate their own language learning experiences from the first day they approach a second/foreign language (Graney, 2000).

As the construct of ‘apprenticeship of observation’ can merely explain ESL/EFL teachers’ own learning experiences from the perspective as classroom students, their experiences as second/foreign language learners have been overlooked to a large extent. Many ESL/EFL teachers, themselves being successful language learners, may have undergone some ‘autonomous learning’ (Gardner & Miller, 1999) in the target language. More possibly, most of them have had various informal language learning experiences when acquiring a second/foreign language.

Johnson (1999) argues that language teachers have informal language learning experiences. In those contexts, language is used in real social settings with its main function being as a means of meaningful communication. According to Johnson, such experiences can “leave powerful imprints on teachers” (p.34). However, she also notes the coexistence of teachers’ formal and informal language learning experiences can “create conflicting beliefs for teachers” (Johnson, 1999. p.34). She remarked:

In fact, such conflicting language learning experiences can create havoc for teachers as they began to teach, because in most cases, their informal language learning experiences tend to be more positive, more meaningful, and more in line with the idealized image they hold for themselves as teachers. However, since these experiences occur outside the classroom, teachers may have few concrete models of how to recreate such experiences for their own students in their own classrooms. Moreover, the artificial nature of the language classroom itself makes most classroom activities pale in comparison to the experience of using language for meaningful communication, and both teachers and students know this. (p.34)

Teachers' language learning experiences in teacher education have also gained much attention in recent years. Since the 1980s, "language learning experiences are often used as components in pre-service and in-service teacher education programs" (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 2001, p.107). In those cases, teachers will be asked to either learn a foreign/second language or to increase the proficiency in those they have already studied. The learning processes are varied as well. Choices can be made from either taking a language class or just studying a language on one's own.

Bailey, Curtis and Nunan (2001) emphasize the importance of getting teachers to experience language learning because it represents "one of the best opportunities" for a language teacher's professional development. Through learning, teachers can become aware of their own mental processes and affective responses to foreign or second language learning. These experiences can help teachers "to better understand language" (p.96) , to gain insight into students' learning processes, understand the challenges students face and thereby inform their approaches to teaching (Bailey, Curtis and Nunan, 2001).

For the purpose of this study, the term language learning experiences (LLEs) is meant to emphasize the continuous, accumulative and complex nature of teachers' language learning. It therefore encompasses teachers' various experiences of language learning that were gained in class (formal) and out of class (informal); after entering the teaching profession as target language teachers; and in teacher education or professional development programs.

### *Teachers' Beliefs*

Numerous studies confirm that teachers' beliefs represent important influences on teachers' ways of thinking, understanding, classroom behaviors and the learning environment (Brown & Rose, 1995; Chan & Elliott, 2004; Johnson, 1994). Teachers' beliefs lie at the heart of teaching (Kagan, 1992) and represent the most valuable psychological construct to teacher education (Pintrich, 1990). At the same time, the construct is among the most difficult to define. More importantly, "little attention has been paid to the nature and origin of teachers' beliefs, or the ways in which teachers' beliefs manifest themselves within teachers' professional realities" (Johnson, 1994, p.439).

The difficulty related to defining and studying the construct, in part, is due to "poor conceptualizations, and differing understandings of beliefs and belief structures" (Pajares, 1992, p.307). According to Pajares, teachers' beliefs, as a belief substructure, have been studied by diverse disciplines, which consequently resulted in various definitions. Kagan (1992) also notes that the term 'teachers' beliefs' has not been used

consistently in the literature. Some researchers referred to it as teachers' "principles of practice, personal epistemology, perspectives, practical knowledge, or orientations" (Kagan, 1992, p.66). Others suggested the terms 'belief system' (Pajares, 1992), 'BAK (beliefs, assumptions and knowledge)' (Woods, 1996), 'implicit theories' (Clark, 1988) and 'teacher cognition' (Borg, 1999).

As defined by Kagan (1992), teachers' beliefs are "tacit, often unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms, and the academic material to be taught" (p.65). Nespor (1987) specifies that teachers' beliefs have a number of properties as follows: 1) they sometimes contain assumptions about the existence of entities beyond the teachers control or influence, 2) they can include conceptualizations of ideal situations that differ from reality, 3) they rely heavily on affective and evaluative components, 4) they derive much of their power from memories of specific events, 5) they are not open to critical examination or outside evaluation, and 6) the domains to which specific beliefs may apply are undefined (as cited from Joram & Gabriele, 1998).

When examining the notion of reflection, Dewey (1933), asserted that "reflection implies that something is believed in (or disbelieved in), not on its own direct account, but through something else which stands as witness, evidence, proof, voucher, warrant; that is, as ground of belief" (p.11). This position indirectly indicates that beliefs are largely constructed out of the accumulation of real-life experiences. Like Dewey, Donaghue (2003), Johnson (1999) and Richards and Lockhart (1994) also suggest that teachers' beliefs relate largely to their personal experiences. As Richards and Lockhart (1994) note, there are six different sources from which teachers' beliefs are derived: 1)

Their own experience as language learners, 2) Experience of what works best, 3) Established practice, 4) Personality factors, 5) Educationally-based or research-based principles and 6) Principles derived from an approach or method. Richards and Lockhart explain further that “all teachers were once students, and their beliefs about teaching are often a reflection of how they themselves were taught” (P.30). Johnson (1999) also posits that “if beliefs are grounded in episodic memories from prior experiences, then the language learning experiences of teachers will certainly have a powerful impact on their beliefs” (p.34).

Moreover, a common conclusion about the nature of teachers’ beliefs is that they are inextricably complex and resistant to change (Brousseau et al., 1988; Lamm, 2000; Nespor, 1987; Richardson, 1996). Some studies suggest that, despite course work training and field experiences, pre-service teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning remain largely unchanged (see McDaniel, 1991; McLaughlin, 1991; Weinstein, 1990). Johnson (1999) also suggests, “when teachers enter professional development programs at either the pre-service or the in-service level, they bring with them an accumulation of experiences that manifest themselves in beliefs that tend to be quite stable and rather resistant to change” (p.30).

For the purpose of this study, teachers’ beliefs are “personally-held convictions about the nature of teaching and learning, students, subject matter, the curriculum, and the classroom context” (Bodur, 2003, p. 7).

### *Summary*

This chapter established a conceptual framework to assist in understanding the two main concepts of the study: LLEs and beliefs. In terms of the former, this chapter focused mainly on the review of its nature and importance. The nature and origin of beliefs were examined to assist in understanding the underlying assumptions behind the study's research questions.

Oprandy (1999) emphasizes the importance of making personal connections to language teaching. Likewise, Bailey, Curtis and Nunan (2001) posit that language teachers' personal experiences are essential. In spite of the fact that language teachers' own LLEs can be of much value, few studies, unfortunately, have provided a detailed and holistic picture of the experiences of ESL/EFL teachers'.

Language teachers' LLEs are continuous and accumulative. It seems to be particularly so when NNS language teachers are concerned as the subject matter they learn and therefore teach is not their own first language. Undeniably, many researchers have focused on teachers' 'apprenticeship of observation' and equated the concept largely with their prior learning experiences. However, teacher learning, and ESL/EFL teachers' language learning in particular, do not always occur in the classroom and thus cannot simply involve watching or imitating teachers' work. Language teachers have informal LLEs in which language is learned out-of-class, in real social settings, or by autonomous learning. Moreover, teachers' LLEs in teacher education programs examined from the perspective as language teachers, also help per-service and in-service language teachers refresh their past language learning memories.

Since the late 1980s, there has been a growing literature on teachers' beliefs. However, the construct is among the most difficult to define as well. In spite of the fact that teachers' beliefs are "tacit, often unconsciously held assumptions" (Kagan, 1992, p.65), they are inextricably complex and resistant to change. More importantly, as Johnson (1994) noted, "little attention has been paid to the nature and origin of teachers' beliefs" (p.439). Some researchers (e.g., Dewey, 1933; Donaghue, 2003; Johnson, 1999; Richards and Lockhart, 1994) also suggested that teachers' beliefs relate largely to their personal experiences.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Review of the Literature

#### *Introduction*

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review of the literature related to studies of teachers' LLEs and beliefs. The review will target ESL/EFL teachers' language learning experiences that were most similar to the focus of this study. Through an analysis and synthesis of related literature, this section aims to create what Marshall and Rossman (1995) refer to as "a logical framework for the research that sets it within a tradition of inquiry and a context of related studies" (p.28). Finally, the chapter will present the contributions of the present study to this body of literature.

#### *Review of the Literature*

Bailey et al. (1996) carried out a study to investigate the role of student-teachers' own experiences as language learners in shaping their teaching philosophy and practice. The study was a collaborative effort made by one teacher educator and seven pre-service teachers. The authors equated teachers' personal language learning experiences to their "13,000-hour apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975) spent in classrooms watching their teachers' teaching since primary school. Drawing on work related to reflective teaching, the study documented and analysed data from teachers' language learning autobiographies and journal entries. The study's findings revealed that participant teachers' own teaching philosophies (in some cases inexplicit) had been moulded by their

own language learning histories. Specifically, the authors noted: “as a result of the autobiography task, we realized that our learning experiences had influenced our criteria for judging our language learning as successful or unsuccessful” (p. 14). Moreover, the “teacher factor” (i.e. teachers’ personalities, expectations, respect for learners, etc.) instead of teaching methodology in the period of “apprenticeship of observation” was identified as the main factor that influenced whether teachers perceived a language learning experience as successful. The study therefore implied that the process of reexamining the past “helped many to discover the ‘why’ behind our beliefs” and “gave us a chance to...build a bridge to our future as language teachers” (p.22).

Brown and McGannon (1998) examined 35 student-teachers’ beliefs about language learning and the roles of language teachers. The teachers-in-training who enrolled in the one-year pre-service teacher education program were very experienced language learners and the majority of the group also had some experiences as language teachers. One of the main objectives of the study was to “explore the influences of prior experiences as language teachers and learners on student-teachers’ views of how languages are learned and can best be taught” (p.4).

Unlike in Bailey et al., Brown and McGannon (1998) found that student-teachers’ experiences as language learners as well as their experiences as language teachers “make up an ‘apprenticeship of observation’” (p.3). Brown and McGannon administered a survey both before and after the first teaching practicum as a means of collecting data on the student-teachers’ preconceptions about language teaching and learning. For each of

the two phases of data collection, students also provided an open-ended response to one of the statements they viewed as the most important in the survey.

Results revealed that students who did not have previous teaching practice drew on their own experiences as language learners for understanding and beliefs about language learning and teaching while those who had previous teaching experiences positioned themselves firmly as language teachers. The classroom experience also shifted students' discussion to their practicum experiences. Brown and McGannon therefore concluded and suggested that it is important for both teacher educators and student-teachers to be aware of the strong influence of the apprenticeship of observation on teachers' beliefs. The study also emphasized the importance of guided reflection in giving voice to student-teachers' personal experiences.

Johnson (1994) conducted a qualitative study to explore four pre-service ESL teachers' beliefs. Several sources of data were collected and themes were inferred from teachers' narratives, intentions and instructional practices. As indicated in the study, each participating teacher had both formal and informal language learning experiences. Analysis showed that both types of language learning experiences "left lasting images" for them and had "a powerful impact on their beliefs about second language teachers and teaching" (p.444). Findings also suggested that pre-service teachers "judged the appropriateness of certain theories, methods, and materials in terms of their own first-hand experiences as second language learners" (p.445).

Furthermore, teachers' images of their informal language learning experiences were found to be in sharp contrast to their images of formal learning experiences. Their

images of themselves as teachers revealed that they were more projected “in reaction to the negative images teachers’ held of their own classroom learning experiences” (p.445). One of the more important implications of the findings of this study therefore was that the teachers’ beliefs in second/foreign language instructional contexts were largely based on their images from prior experiences within formal language classrooms. Even though teachers wanted to provide alternative teaching practice based on their prior experiences as informal language learners, “they lacked clear images of how to create these sorts of experiences in an actual classroom” (p.449).

Cervi (1989) conducted a critical self-reflection of his own language learning experiences to examine “how, if at all, these might throw some light on common approaches in the TESOL classroom” (p.10). In the self-study, the author reflected on his traditional way of learning French and Russian at school and learning German through informal immersion. He then elaborated in detail on three phases he experienced in learning Japanese. Cervi recalled his self-immersion in the culture and learning by osmosis at the beginning, a formal learning later in classroom and, finally, a ‘wide-range’ of informal learning to internalize the language. Through analyzing such personal language learning histories, Cervi concluded that neither traditional language teaching methodologies nor informal language immersion alone are sufficient, though both have some advantages. The author finally implied that teachers should either find out the kind of learning going on out of the classroom, tailor teaching “to complement it or compensate for its absence” or “provide systematic teaching complemented by attempts to foster independent learning strategies” (p.12).

Sakui (2002) employed a self-study in the form of narratives to determine how the learning experiences of a non-native English teacher influenced her beliefs and practices in language teaching. The main data of the study were derived from self-reflective journal entries the author kept for a period of six months. The other data came from her learning history and included epiphanies in her learning and life experiences. Through examining her language learning history, the author used a metaphor of 'Swiss cheese' to identify herself. Although she possessed good language abilities, she also had many holes formed in the cheese production process as her shortcomings in the second language. Sakui concluded that her various learning and life experiences were closely related to her professional personal beliefs and knowledge, and influenced her teaching by providing her with insights that fed into her teaching practice. She noted:

These holes are indeed my assets as a teacher. I can identify students' air bubbles clearly: where they are struggling, what might remain permanent, and what could be improved now or later...I also believe acknowledgement of overcoming the holes helps learners to sustain motivation...and demonstrate that some of their air bubbles have disappeared. I believe a sense of accomplishment may help to develop learner autonomy, overriding the negative emotional aspects of learning and moving them to the next stage. (p.147)

To explore second/foreign language teachers' language learning experiences after entering the teaching profession, Lowe (1987) conducted a study in a teacher education program. In the study, a group of teachers consciously reversed their roles to become learners of a foreign language. The overall objective was to "give teachers a chance to renew their connection with language learning, and thereby to become more sensitive to the problems and process confronting their learners" (p.89). Lowe analyzed the diaries teachers kept about their language learning experiences in the teacher education program.

Data analysis raised issues related to second/foreign language acquisition such as affective, social, attitudinal and cognitive factors. Lowe concluded that the reflective diaries made teachers realize how essential it is to remember their way of learning. It was when, in their roles as students, that the teachers were able to look critically at some of their professional preconceptions: “In particular, they were able to reconsider the roles of praise, grammar, repetition, revision, and communicative teaching, at least as they understand and practice them” (p.95).

Water, Sunderland, Bray and Allwright (1990) presented a similar study but on in-service teachers. The purpose of their study was to examine the effectiveness of the language learning experience as a teacher-development procedure and, at the same time, to describe some of the potential constraints in this approach. By taking courses in a foreign language, the participant teachers were asked to keep their language learning diaries and take part in some follow-up discussions. The main findings revealed that the LLE has value as a means of helping teachers “get the best out” of teacher education programs and can “extend well beyond its role as a means of sharpening awareness about the nature of the language-learning process” (p. 308). However, several pitfalls were outlined which the authors perceived might occur in using this approach. These mainly include: 1) the inappropriateness of the language chosen, 2) teachers’ confronting negative learning experiences, 3) teachers’ modeling lessons learned in the program as the most effective teaching and 4) the LLE being too far removed from participants’ own teaching situations. The authors also concluded that other, more deep-seated problems

might be rooted in the varying schema through which participants view LLE as a teacher-development tool.

Birch (1992) conducted a study with several EFL teachers to describe and examine how LLEs would be built into a Graduate Diploma program. Teachers enrolled could either opt to stay and study Mandarin as a foreign language in Australia, or go to Thailand, teach EFL and study Thai while being immersed in the target culture. In either case, teachers were required to keep diaries to record their reflections on language learning and to produce a case study which brought together themes that the learner considered particularly significant. The setup allowed a contrast of experiences between the two groups, which revealed that the immersion situation was quite powerful. Some results also implied that teachers' beliefs were also refined and expanded by the experience. As an example, the teachers arrived in Thailand with a strong belief in the advantages of a communicative language teaching approach. As a result of the language learning experience, they "emerged with a much more complex view of the nature of the approach and its relationship to the social, psychological and cultural context of language teaching" (p.289).

Birch emphasized the need for language teachers to have a current language learning experience. For him, although most second language teachers have some personal experiences of learning another language, those experiences were normally undertaken a long time ago, "well before they became second-language teachers and their memories of the experience are too hazy to be reliable as a guide to second language learning processes" (p.287). He therefore concluded that LLEs in teacher education

programs helped teachers to clarify their own beliefs about the nature of second language learning. The LLE also “enabled them to understand better the language learning experience of their second language students and that consequently they had modified their teaching” (p.285).

Flowerdew (1998) described a reflective language learning experience as a part of an EFL teacher preparation program. Following earlier studies, the goal of this research was to develop language teachers’ insights into their future students’ learning processes and thereby inform their approaches to teaching. Since the entire program was based on a reflective approach to teacher education, the study also investigated how a LLE can “maximize its reflective potential by being fully integrated with the other components of a teacher education program” (p.530). As in previous studies, participant teachers were asked to keep written diaries during their language learning. The final entry of each diary would be an extended reflection on the whole language course.

Results revealed that learners’ diaries covered a wide range of issues concerned with second/foreign language education, such as learners’ motivation, strategies and socio-cultural issues. The course gave teachers an opportunity to gain experience in learning a language and thus understand the difficulties that language learners may experience. Results also showed that, through reflection, both participant teachers’ experiential knowledge and received knowledge were developed and integrated. Finally, the author emphasized the value of reflection in teacher education.

Latulippe (1999) conducted a study to gain new perspectives on language learning. In her study, she chose to enroll in language learning courses. She framed her

experience of studying Spanish as a beginner and admitted that the role reversal was more difficult than she thought it would be, partly because of the loss of self-esteem she experienced. She drew conclusions about language teaching from her own experiences as follows: “I was surprised at my initial reactions to these obstacles and gained new insights into how our intensive English program students must feel and how we can help them” (p. 18).

### *The Contribution of the Study*

Although a significant body of research has focused on different aspects of teachers' LLEs, only a few have aimed to understand and explore such personal experiences as an inseparable continuum. Unlike previous work, this study therefore does not focus solely on teachers' LLEs before their teaching practice, nor does it pay attention only to teachers' formal LLEs in classrooms. By emphasizing the importance and value of teachers' continuous and complex language learning, the study intends to look into all possible LLEs of teachers. These may include those gained beyond school, as practicing language teachers, and in professional development. In this regard, the present study focuses on capturing a comprehensive picture of the LLEs of language teachers.

A further contribution of this study is its attempt to understand second/foreign language teachers' beliefs in such a way as to connect to teachers' LLEs. Although some scholars (e.g. Donaghue, 2003; Johnson, 1999; Richards & Lockhart, 1994) agree that teachers' beliefs, in part, originate from teachers' personal experiences, little research has explored the connections between teachers' LLEs and their beliefs as language teachers.

The present study proposes to examine the possible congruencies and incongruencies between the two constructs. At the same time, the study is not based on any prior assumptions about these connections or lack thereof. The goal of the study is to look for properties and categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that might be either common to both constructs or unique to one or the other construct. The study does not aim to isolate or identify causes or correlations between LLEs and beliefs as this goal would be beyond the scope and character of this study. The analysis of the findings will not be framed by existing theoretical frameworks or theories. Instead, grounded theory as espoused and articulated by Strauss and Corbin (1998) is relied on as a means of making sense of the study's findings.

The review of the literature in this chapter has drawn attention to the existing empirical research on language teachers' learning experiences and how these experiences might impact teachers' beliefs or/and practice. A large body of research concerned with understanding teachers' personal LLEs has focused on pre-service teachers. There is a dearth of research that aims to investigate and understand in-service teachers' LLEs. An important contribution of this study is therefore to fill this gap.

Also, while some studies seek to explain the value of teachers' LLEs as an approach in teacher education programs, there is relatively little empirical research that intends exclusively to explore and understand the power of teachers' prior experiences as second/foreign language learners. Bailey et al's (1996) study and that of Brown and McGannon (1998) both examined teachers' prior LLEs as students. However, the definitions of LLEs in the two studies were not identical. Brown and McGannon (1998)

referred it directly to teachers' 'apprenticeship of observation' while Bailey et al's (1996) deemed teachers' teaching practices should also be included in such learning experiences. Johnson's (1994) study is the only one that explored language teachers' informal LLEs and her conclusions related more specifically to the focus of the present study. However, as the participants in her study were pre-service teachers instead of in-service ones, teachers' LLEs gained after their entering the teaching profession were not included. Therefore, this study provides a contribution in terms of its definitional inclusiveness of language teachers' personal learning experiences.

Another important contribution of this study relates to its subject definition and selection. The participants involved in this study are Chinese in-service NNS EFL teachers at university level. The participants are therefore characterized by "Chinese", "in-service", "NNS", "EFL teachers" and "at university level". The present review of the literature uncovered little research concerned with Chinese NNS EFL teachers' beliefs. The literature on this topic tends to be categorized into domain areas such as teachers' beliefs about teaching reading (e.g. Lee, 1998) or grammar (Borg, 1999). No studies were found that explore their beliefs about teaching and learning EFL in general and there is no one study examining the LLEs of this group.

A final contribution of this study to the body of literature that is concerned about teacher's own LLEs and/or their beliefs relates to its methodology. The study took advantage of the affordances of web-based technologies to elicit teachers' beliefs, personal experiences and histories. This approach to inquiry provided the participating teachers with an opportunity to reflect on their own language learning histories and

experiences collaboratively and individually. The study's reliance on three methods of data collection (questionnaire, focus group and individual interviews) provided a triangulated perspective from which to gain insight into teachers' beliefs and experiences.

### *Summary*

This chapter provided a review of the literature on studies similar to the one being conducted in this research. Bailey et al. (1996) carried out a study to investigate the role of student-teachers' own experiences as language learners in shaping their teaching philosophy and practice. In the study, the authors equated teachers' personal language learning experiences to their "apprenticeship of observation" and referred such experiences to the hours pre-service teachers spent in classrooms watching their teachers' teaching since primary school.

Brown and McGannon (1998) examined 35 student-teachers' beliefs about language learning and the roles of language teachers. One of the main objectives of the study was to "explore the influences of prior experiences as language teachers and learners on student-teachers' views of how languages are learned and can best be taught" (p.4). They indicated in their study that student-teachers' experiences as language learners as well as their experiences as language teachers "make up an 'apprenticeship of observation'" (p.3).

Johnson (1994) conducted a qualitative study to explore four pre-service ESL teachers' beliefs. As indicated in the study, each participating teacher had both formal and informal language learning experiences. Analysis showed both types of language

learning experiences “left lasting images” for them and “have a powerful impact on their beliefs about second language teachers and teaching” (p.444).

Cervi (1989) conducted a critical self-reflection on his own LLEs to examine “how, if at all, these might throw some light on common approaches in the TESOL classroom” (p.10). Through analyzing such personal language learning histories, Cervi concluded that neither traditional language teaching methodologies nor informal language immersion alone can be sufficient, though both have some advantages.

Sakui (2002) employed a self-study in the form of narratives to illustrate how a non-native speaker teacher of English’s learning experiences influenced her beliefs and practices in language teaching. She concluded that her various learning and life experiences were closely related to her professional personal beliefs and knowledge, and as well influenced her teaching by providing her with insights that feed into her teaching practice.

Lowe (1987) conducted a study in a teacher education program to explore second/foreign language teachers’ LLEs after entering the teaching profession. Lowe finally concluded that the reflective diaries of teachers’ LLEs in the teacher education program made teachers realize how essential it is to remember the way of learning. Water, Sunderland, Bray and Allwright (1990) presented a similar study on in-service teachers. The purpose of their study was to examine the effectiveness of the LLE as a teacher-development procedure and at the same time, to describe some of the potential constraints in this approach.

Birch (1992) conducted a study with several EFL teachers to describe and examine how LLEs would be built into a Graduate Diploma program. Some results implied that teachers' beliefs were refined and expanded by such experiential experience. Birch also emphasized the need for language teachers to have current LLEs. Flowerdew (1998) described a reflective LLE as part of an EFL teacher preparation program. Following earlier studies, the goal of this research was to develop language teachers' insights into their future students' learning processes and thereby inform their approaches to teaching. Latulippe (1999) conducted a study to gain new perspectives on language learning. She framed her experience of studying Spanish as a beginner and admitted that the role reversal was more difficult than she thought it would be.

At the end of this chapter, the contribution of this study was presented in light of the relevant literature. Chapter 4 will discuss the methodology used in this study: overview of the research design, recruitment and participant selection, data collection techniques as well as data analysis strategies.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Methodology

#### *Introduction*

Teachers' beliefs belong to the area of thought processes that occur inside teachers' heads and are thus unobservable in the same way that behavior can be (Clark & Peterson, 1986). They have a very covert nature and are hard to elicit (Milne & Taylor, 1995); are often tacit, unconsciously held and may even be unrecognizable to the teachers holding them (Kagan, 1992; Woods, 1996). Not surprisingly, Pajares (1992) therefore argues that the construct of belief does not lend itself easily to empirical investigation. Likewise, Murphy (2000) posits that "focusing on what happens inside teachers' heads presents certain obvious research challenges" (p.101). Similar conclusions regarding investigations of teachers' beliefs have been reached by other researchers (e.g. Fang, 1996; Johnson, 1994; Kagan, 1992; Munby, 1984; Rokeach, 1968).

It is in recognition of the challenges of studying beliefs that this study has adopted non-obtrusive techniques supported by electronic technologies to create qualitative profiles of the language learning experiences and beliefs of a group of non-native speaking EFL teachers in China. This chapter provides an overview of the methodology. It begins with a description of the research design and follows with a description of procedures for recruitment of participants. Data collection techniques and the process of data analysis are also presented. The chapter also provides a discussion of the limitations of the data collection techniques.

### *Overview of Research Design*

The purpose of this study was to explore and gain insight into the personal LLEs and beliefs of a group of Chinese EFL teachers. The case study approach was chosen because neither the language learning nor teaching experiences of this population under study can be “readily distinguishable from its context” (Yin, 1993, p.3). Moreover, “there is a growing consensus that the strongest means of drawing inferences from case studies is the use of a combination of within-case analysis and cross-case comparisons within a single study or research program” (George & Bennett, 2005, p.18). Multiple cases, compared to single ones, are often considered to be able to achieve more compelling evidence, and make a study therefore regarded as being more robust (Herriott & Firestone, 1983; Yin, 1994).

Berg (2004) defines qualitative case study methods as “systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event, or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how the subject operates or functions” (p.251). The approach “strives to portray ‘what it is like’ to be in a particular situation, to catch the close-up reality and ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of participants’ lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for, a situation” (as cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p.182). Lincoln and Guba (1985) summarize a number of characteristics of the case study approach which are especially advantageous to the naturalistic inquirer. These include: 1) the case study may be epistemologically in harmony with the reader’s experience by enabling the reader to achieve personal understandings through ‘naturalistic generalization’ (Stake, 1978); 2) the case study is an effective vehicle for

demonstrating the interplay between inquirer and the respondents; 3) the case study provides the reader an opportunity to probe for internal consistency; 4) the case study provides the 'thick description' necessary for judgments of transferability; and 5) the case study provides a grounded assessment of context (pp. 358-360).

Murphy (2000) indicates that "innovative and non-obtrusive techniques are required to elicit tacitly held beliefs and to provide an environment in which teachers will be encouraged to reflect on and articulate their beliefs" (p.100). This study draws on the advances of online research to modify and "mould traditional qualitative research methods to the Internet environment" (Denzin, 2004, p.1). The study relies on use of an online questionnaire; an online asynchronous focus group and email-based individual interviews to elicit teachers' LLEs and beliefs. The combination of three data collection techniques helps reach "triangulation" (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2002) of the qualitative research and therefore strengthens the present study.

Walstrom (2004) points out the many advantages of online studies, which include "expanded access to and comfort for research participants, decreased cost and time, removal of transcription biases, and simplified data organization" (p.81). Computer-mediated communication facilitates "a more immediate access to each other's thought processes" (Feenberg, 1987), frees participants from spatio-temporal limitations (McComb, 1993), and allows for absence of physical presence and informal, oral modes of communication (Shank, 1993; Murphy, 2000). As Feenberg (1987) notes, "the loss of the interlocutor's bodily presence does not signify impersonality, but freedom from undesirable social constraints" (p.174). Without such social constraints and with the

informal pattern of communication in written interaction, teachers might feel more at ease and freer to articulate what is normally held tacit.

A grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used as a framework of the research design and to analyse the data. According to Goulding (2002), grounded theory is “most commonly used to generate theory where little is already known, or to provide a fresh slant on existing knowledge” (p.42). It thus serves the needs of the current study as little is known about either Chinese EFL teachers’ personal LLEs or their congruencies or incongruencies with the teachers’ beliefs about EFL teaching and learning.

#### *Recruitment and Participant Selection*

Unlike quantitative researchers who tend to generalize to a population, qualitative researchers purposefully or intentionally select individuals and sites to best understand the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2005). Mason (2002) defines ‘purposive (or theoretical) sampling’ as selecting groups to study on the basis of their relevance to the research questions, theoretical position, analytical framework, and most importantly the argument or explanation being developed in the research. For the purpose of this study, a comprehensive university in the central part of China was chosen purposefully to be the site of the study. An appropriate ‘sampling frame’ (Jackson, 2002) was set from which to draw a sample. This includes all the in-service non-native speaking EFL teachers in the Faculty of Foreign Language and Literature in the target university.

Research participants were recruited through collective recruiting and use of computers and the Internet. An e-mail (Appendix A) was sent to all 64 members in the 'sampling frame' to request participation. This e-mail briefly described the purpose and nature of the present research as well as the activities in which participants would take part. During a period of two weeks, twelve teachers replied to the email and provided their informed consent (see Appendix B). Data collection began with all consenting participants in anticipation of some teachers withdrawing from the study before its completion. One participant left the study during the administration of the online questionnaire while another one left in the middle of the focus group. Although the other ten participants remained in the study, only six participants completed all three phases of the study and it was therefore these six who were profiled in this study.

#### *Data Collection Techniques*

The data collection lasted for a total of two months with three techniques relied on to inquire into teachers' language learning experiences and beliefs: 1) an online questionnaire, 2) an asynchronous, online focus group, and 3) email-based individual interviews.

##### *Online questionnaire*

The questionnaire was piloted by five EFL teachers from China one month prior to its administration. It was then administered online for a period of two weeks immediately after participants were recruited. It was divided into three different parts to 'perform different tasks' (Saris, 1991, p.63). The first part encompassed several

background/demographic questions which aimed to assess the personal characteristics of the participants such as name, age, gender, number of years of teaching, etc. The second group of questions were open-ended and designed to elicit information about individual LLEs (see Appendix C for the entire questionnaire). An example of one such question is as follows:

If applicable, describe any experiences of language proficiency improvement in your teacher education program. How did these experiences help/not help your language learning and/or teaching?

The final part of the questionnaire aimed to gain insight into teachers' beliefs. After modifying and synthesizing some questionnaires from the literature (e.g., Allen's 2002 'Foreign language education questionnaire'; Horwitz's 1985 'BALLI' (beliefs about language learning inventory); Johnson's 1992 'Teachers' beliefs inventory'), 26 statements were designed. Four basic areas were addressed in the statements: beliefs about the nature of English, beliefs about EFL learning, beliefs about teaching EFL as well as the beliefs about the teaching program and the curriculum. Teachers were asked to check any of the statements that corresponded to their personal beliefs. Two open-ended questions were also included to encourage more in depth response as follows:

1. Please select 5 statements in the above question that best reflect your personal beliefs about language learning and teaching:
2. If applicable, provide some reasons why you selected the 5 statements:

The questionnaire was Internet-based. Compared to traditional mail-out questionnaires, electronic questionnaires provide "an easy, quick form of data collection" (Creswell, 2005, p. 361). Also, since e-mail and other forms of online communication can be instantaneously transmitted, lower costs and more-timely response rates are often

touted as some of the benefits of online questionnaires (Schaefer & Dillman, 1998; Schonlau, Fricker & Elliott, 2002; Tse, 1998).

Nesbary (2000) summarizes three different ways to conduct questionnaires through the Internet. Researchers can place the instruments on computer disks in word-processing formats, create a hypertext file and place surveys on websites, or conventionally generate an e-mail survey. To facilitate access to this Internet-based questionnaire, a 'dual-response mode' strategy which is recommended by Dillman (2000) was applied. Thus, the questionnaire was, on one hand, placed in a word-processing format and sent to the twelve consenting teachers via e-mail attachment. In addition, it was uploaded to a WebCT™ shell set up specifically for this study. Respondents could opt to either answer in a word-processing format and return via e-mail attachment or simply complete the survey online and return by clicking a 'Submit' button. WebCT™ was chosen for the study over other learning management systems because the researcher's university held a license to it.

An introductory e-mail was sent to pre-notify participants of the administration of the questionnaire. Also, a follow-up e-mail and the questionnaire were sent out to the individuals who had not responded by the tenth day after distribution of the original survey. This e-mail also included the web location of the questionnaire where participants could complete it online. Eleven of the initial 12 participants completed the questionnaires. Seven teachers completed the questionnaire online in the WebCT™ shell while four others completed it in a word-processing format and returned it via email attachment.

### *Asynchronous Online Focus Group*

The online focus group lasted for a period of six weeks and began immediately after all participants had completed the questionnaire. The purpose of the focus group was to provide participant teachers an opportunity to reflect and share their personal experiences and articulate their implicit beliefs about EFL teaching and learning in China.

The online focus group of this study largely resembled its traditional forms, except for the need to transfer some of the qualities online (Mann & Stewart, 2003). Focus group (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 2002; Patton, 2002) refers to the interview with a small group of people to gain information about their views and experiences of a specific topic. According to Patton (2002), it is “not primarily a discussion, although direct interactions among participants often occur...The object is to get high-quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others”. Likewise, Krueger (1994) notes that “group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussion” (p.6). Sim (1998) argues that focus group interviews “tap a different realm of social reality” (p. 350) from the one uncovered by one-on-one interviewing. A similar position was also indicated by Montell (1999) that “The point is not whether the data are likely to be more objective and accurate [in group or individual interviews] but rather that the goals and kinds of data obtained are very different in each” (p.66). As Gibbs (1997) concludes, the benefits of focus group include “gaining insights into people’s shared understandings of everyday life and the ways in which individuals are influenced by others in a group situation” (¶1).

The focus group took place within the WebCT™ discussion forum. Four questions were uploaded to the forum one by one in the six-week period. Participants were given approximately one and a half weeks to reflect and respond to each of the questions. All questions as well as all responses were visible to all participants. Participants were able to reply to or comment on the responses of others.

An introductory e-mail was sent to each of the participants to provide information about how to use the forum. This information included how to gain access to the forum after logging into WebCT™, how to post and receive messages as well as start a new ‘thread’ in the forum. The first message was a welcome message (see Appendix D) which “sought to set the tone and atmosphere for the on-line groups to follow” (Mann & Stewart, 2003, p. 98). At the same time, the researcher initiated an informal introduction (Appendix E) and encouraged others to share information about themselves.

The other questions were designed to provide teachers with an opportunity to reflect on and recount their experiences and to present and share their anecdotes about language learning and teaching. The questions did not focus directly on teachers’ beliefs. Instead, the focus was on participant’s descriptions of and interpretations of their experiences and was designed to elicit their beliefs indirectly. The questions were as follows:

**Question 1:**

Please describe your own in-class language learning experiences. What were your English learning experiences like in school? What were your English learning experiences like in college?

**Question 2:**

Regarding your in-class language learning experiences, were there any experiences that impressed you during this time? What did you like about them?

What did you dislike? Do you think that the methods your teachers used were effective? Why? Would you have preferred a different approach? Why?

Question 3:

Describe any of your out-of-class English learning experiences. What did you like about them? What did you dislike about them? What learning methods did you find most effective for you? Why?

Question 4:

Describe your EFL teaching style/approach/method. Why do you teach this way? Would you like to try a different approach? Why or why not? Did your own language learning experiences, both the ones in and out of the classes, affect you as a teacher? How? Why? What sort of impact do you believe they have had on your EFL teaching (style/approach/method)?

#### *Individual Online Interviews*

Jackson (2002) noted that when participants know they are being studied and particularly in a cooperative context with other members, “they may alter their presentations of self to fit the situation” (p. 181). Some participants might also, “for their own reasons...choose not to express to the entire group” (Murphy, 2000, p.116). It was for this reason that a more formalized system of individual interviewing was also incorporated into the study. The interviewing was conducted using email-based, one-on-one, online conversations between the researcher and each of the teacher participants. The one-on-one interviews were designed to give teachers a different context in which to make explicit and articulate more privately their experiences and beliefs. Their purpose was also to probe more deeply, to seek further clarification on certain points articulated in the focus group, or to ask for more detailed descriptions and explanations.

The asynchronous individual interviews were conducted simultaneously through e-mail correspondence using a ‘reply privately’ option available in the discussion forum

within the WebCT shell. For each response to the focus group questions, a one-on-one dialogue was conducted with the participant. An individual interview took place immediately after a participant had contributed in the discussion forum. Questions for the interviews were developed following Patton's (1990) categories of: "experience/behaviour", "opinion/value", "feeling", "sensory descriptions" "background/demographic", and "knowledge of the subject" (as cited from LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 173). Questions were nonstandardized and were tailored for different individuals based on an on-going understanding and analysis of their responses to the questionnaire and the focus group questions. The questions invited respondents to "talk at length, in their own terms, and with time to reflect", while the researcher obtained "clarification and amplification of interesting points, with appropriate probing, and targeted questioning" (Gaskell, 2000, p.45). Two examples of interview questions are as follows:

You mentioned in this message that teachers 'did not know' about students' interests and needs. To what extent do you think learners' needs should be emphasized in EFL teaching in China? Why? Also, could you please explain in detail the meaning when you referred to 'the shortcomings of the EFL system in China' in this message?

You mentioned in our last discussion that you believe teachers' teaching would be influenced by their answers [to some questions] which most likely were formed during their own schooling under the influences of their EFL teachers. From your perspective, do you think this influence is positive or negative? Why? Do you think your EFL learning experiences beyond schooling also affected you as an EFL teacher? And to what extent?

### *Data Analysis*

A grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to analyse the data. As noted by Strauss and Corbin “a researcher does not begin a project with a preconceived theory in mind. Rather, the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data” (p.12). Grounded theory therefore argues that “the theory evolves during the research process itself and is a product of continuous interplay between analysis and data collection” and it also “requires the recognition that enquiry is always context bound and facts should be viewed as both theory laden and value laden” (Goulding, 2002, p.42). Most importantly, according to Goulding, grounded theory is “most commonly used to generate theory where little is already known, or to provide a fresh slant on existing knowledge” (p.42). It thus serves the needs of the current study as little is known about either Chinese EFL teachers’ personal LLEs or their congruencies or incongruencies with the teachers’ beliefs about EFL teaching and learning.

Ongoing analysis was integrated to each phase of the data collection. As Ezzy (2002) notes, “simultaneous data collection and data analysis...allows the analysis to be shaped by the participants in a more fundamental way than if analysis is left until after the data collection has been finished” (p. 61). In this study, examining data collected from the online questionnaire for ‘cues’ led to the particular topics and questions in the focus group. In the context of the focus group, it was the ongoing analysis of participants’ responses that led to new topics and questions. Finally, the early analysis of the focus group responses also led to the probing in the individual interviews.

Once all the data had been collected, it was organized into manageable formats (Murphy, 2000). As the study was conducted online, data could be easily retrieved and then imported into a word processor. Following the suggestions given by Creswell (2005), a matrix was developed to help the organization. The data were organized into two different formats. On one hand, they were organized by the type of the data being collected: the questionnaire, the focus group and individual interviews. On the other hand, a duplicate copy of all forms of data was organized by each of the cases. This latter organization of the data supported the within- and cross-case analysis.

The reduction of data could, as well be easily accomplished with the cutting and pasting tools provided in any word processor. Both formats of data that were retrieved and organized were reduced. The questionnaire had far less data to be reduced as compared to the interviews. In terms of the focus group, any data not relevant to the study were cut from the file. These included any of the repeated postings and headers, the data that might compromise the anonymity of informants, as well as signature files. Otherwise, all of the postings in the focus group were kept intact. Maintaining the original format and layout of the data gave the researcher a better opportunity to read it “literally” and “reflectively” (Mason, 2002), to catch the flow of the conversation, and to understand the interaction contextually. The data collected from individual interviews were reduced and sharpened in a similar procedure except that less data were included.

All the data were read repeatedly as such to become more familiar with it. This also allowed for “viewing the data from a holistic perspective” (Murphy, 2000, p.123).

Notes were taken while reading the data repetitively, which also led to the follow-up line-by-line analysis and coding of the data.

Grounded theory involves rigorous coding procedures which normally begin with open coding. According to Glaser (1992), open coding is “the initial step of theoretical analysis that pertains to the initial discovery of categories and their properties” (p. 39). During open coding, the data were broken down “into distinct units of meaning. As a result...the text is analysed line by line in an attempt to identify key words or phrases which connect the informant’s account to the experience under investigation” (Goulding, 2002, p. 76). Following this procedure, concepts and their properties were identified and finally yielded to categories.

As Goulding (2002) notes, the process of abstraction is vital in grounded theory to lift the analysis away from description, to theory development. The set of procedures is known as axial coding, which is “the act of relating categories to subcategories along the lines of their properties and dimensions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). The researcher therefore systematically developed and linked categories with subcategories so as to look for explanations and “to gain an understanding of phenomena” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) under study. At the end of this coding, every effort was taken to integrate the concepts and discover the central categories which represented the main themes of the research. The list of criteria proposed by Strauss (1987) was also applied to help determine these categories.

Being a multiple case study, the data analysis also involved analyzing each individual case. All the language learning experiences and beliefs of one individual were

synthesized respectively. The preliminary properties were brought back to the data. Using the cut and paste features of a word processor, all excerpts from a participant were moved into to different categories for descriptive presentation which follows in chapter 5. By checking for consistency of the concepts and patterns among each individual's different phases of data, the researcher aimed to identify 'phenomenon', 'conditions', 'causes and consequences', (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Neuman, 2003, Strauss and Corbin, 1998). By finishing this procedure, the first two research objectives were fulfilled, which were to identify and describe separately the NNS, EFL teachers' LLEs and their beliefs.

The final stage of data analysis was specifically applied for this multiple-case study. Miles and Huberman (1994) note that there are two reasons to conduct cross-case analysis. One is to enhance generalizability while a more fundamental one is to "deepen understanding and explanation" (p.173) on not only what and how, but also why things happen. The preliminary categories and subcategories were layered, interrelated among and compared across cases. Themes were re-integrated to gain a fuller picture of the phenomenon being studied while at the same time some causal-effect conclusions were drawn to answer the third research question.

#### *Member Checks*

In addition to these data collection techniques, an online 'member check' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was conducted at the completion of the presentation of findings. As defined by Jackson (2002), this instrument involves participants "in the data analysis by having them actually read the analysis and then refine it to be congruent with their

experiences” (p. 183). Likewise, Maykut and Morehouse (1994) see member checks as verification of whether the researchers “have produced a recognizable reality” (p.147) in the participant's view. Lincoln and Guba (1985) also posit that the comprehensive check “is not only to test for factual and interpretative accuracy but also to provide evidence of credibility...[and] is thus of critical importance to the inquirers, the respondents, and the consumers of the inquiry report” (pp.373-374).

Immediately after the completion of the profiles, the researcher sent out an e-mail to each participant requesting their comments on the accuracy of their individual profile. They were asked to provide a return reply within ten days. The member checks in this regard gave participants an additional opportunity to ‘monologue’ or ‘dialogue’ with the researcher so as to confirm, clarify or disconfirm some of the descriptions and interpretations based on early analysis of the data.

As participants were non-native speaking EFL teachers, it is understandable that some of their responses were in language that was not idiomatic and that contained certain grammatical mistakes. In cases where the grammatical mistakes might have impeded understanding by the reader of this study, the mistakes were corrected. Otherwise, no changes were made and the addition of [sic] was not used. Thus, the member checks also provided participants an opportunity to verify any changes made to the language in their responses.

### *Limitations of the Data Collection Techniques*

Despite the many advantages of the use of technology in this study, several limitations should also be noted regarding the data collection techniques used. WebCT™ was chosen for the study over other learning management systems because the researcher's university held a license to it. However, it is possible that only those teachers who were comfortable using electronic means as well as learning management systems such as WebCT™ opted to participate in the study or generated the majority of contributions (Nielsen, 1997).

Clarke (2000) noted that the absence of cues is one of the limitations of online studies. It is obvious that the lack of nonverbal cues and the absence of vocal cues (e.g., inflection and intonation) were unavoidable as well in this study. The online setting therefore prevented the researcher from analyzing the participants' body language, facial expressions, and voice tone during either focus group or individual interviews.

Additionally, as all phases of data were collected asynchronously, it is possible that some participants neglected to respond or that some participants lost interest when they found other group members had moved on to other questions. As well, because an online environment sometimes "affords individuals more freedom of expression" (Clarke, 2000, ¶8), participants may easily present themselves less formally and thus contribute with less discretion. This last limitation may well explain some of the participants' lack of attention to correct and idiomatic use of language.

### *Summary*

It is in recognition of the challenges of studying beliefs that this study adopted non-obtrusive techniques supported by electronic technologies to create qualitative profiles of the language learning experiences and beliefs of a group of non-native speaking EFL teachers in China. The case study approach was chosen because neither the language learning nor teaching experiences of this population under study can be “readily distinguishable from its context” (Yin, 1993, p.3).

Research participants were recruited through collective recruiting. Twelve teachers in the target university consented initially to participate in the study. Data collection began with all consenting participants in anticipation of some teachers withdrawing from the study before its completion. One participant left the study during the administration of the online questionnaire while another one left in the middle of the focus group. Although the other ten participants remained in the study, only six participants completed all three phases of the study and it was therefore these six who were profiled in this study.

The data collection for this study lasted for two months in total with three strategies being used to inquire into teachers’ beliefs. The questionnaire was distributed online immediately after participants were recruited and was administered for a period of two weeks. The questionnaire was divided into three different parts.

The online focus group lasted for a period of six weeks and began immediately after all participants had completed the questionnaire. It took place within the WebCT™. Its purpose was to provide participant teachers an opportunity to make explicit in a more

social and cooperative context. Four interview questions were uploaded to WebCT™ one by one in the six-week period. Participants were given approximately one and a half weeks to reflect and respond to each of the questions.

The email-based individual interviews provided teachers a different context in which to make explicit and articulate more privately their LLEs and beliefs. The interviews were conducted simultaneously through e-mail correspondence using a ‘reply privately’ option available in the discussion forum within the WebCT™ shell. An individual interview took place immediately after a participant had contributed in the discussion forum.

A grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to analyse the data. This involved open coding in which properties were identified and finally yielded to categories. The process of abstraction is known as axial coding, which is “the act of relating categories to subcategories along the lines of their properties and dimensions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). Every effort was taken to integrate the concepts and discover the central categories which represented the main themes of the research. Being a multiple case study, the procedures of within- and cross-case analysis were also described in this chapter.

Additionally, member checks were incorporated in order to verify whether the researcher had “produced a recognizable reality” (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p.147). This chapter also discussed some limitations of the data collection methods. In the chapters that follow, the findings and results of the study are presented and interpreted.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Presentation of the Findings

#### *Introduction*

This chapter presents a synthesis of findings for each participant. The focus of the chapter is on describing the six teachers' LLEs and their beliefs. The following chapter, Chapter 6, will present an interpretation and discussion of the findings.

Each participant was given a pseudonym and profiled according to his or her personal LLEs and beliefs about EFL teaching and learning. As such, these two sections parallel the first two objectives of the study as follows:

1. Identify and describe the LLEs of a group of NNS EFL teachers in China;
2. Identify and describe the beliefs of the NNS EFL teachers about teaching and learning the target language.

The profiles of each participant reflect the information given in the questionnaire, the focus group and individual interviews. The personal LLEs are presented chronologically. Participants' experiences are described to capture their continuous and complex nature. The experiences begin from the participants' very first access to EFL and include various learning experiences in both formal (in-class) and informal (out-of-class) settings, as well as, before and after participants' teaching practice. The presentation of the teachers' beliefs attempts to remain true to the complexity of the beliefs. Therefore, if and when beliefs articulated in the questionnaire conflict with comments expressed in focus group or individual interviews, this conflict is highlighted.

### *Profile of Jeff*

#### *LLEs*

Jeff is 29 years old and is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Canada. He had two years of full-time EFL teaching as well as four years of part-time tutoring experiences in China. He is presently tutoring some ESL as well as EFL students online. Like most EFL students in China, Jeff began learning English in his first year of high school in 1987. Compared to the fluent target language speaker he is now, Jeff “used to be a very slow learner” in English and “had difficulty in even memorizing the simplest spelling”. “Like most other EFL learners in China”, he was, “afraid that making mistakes would cause [him] to lose face”.

However, with the help of his first English teacher, “English became easier and much more interesting” and he began making “huge progress” during the three years when the teacher taught him:

I remembered clearly that, in the first dictation test, I earned 28 out of 100 (lowest in class). In the second year, I won trophies for making the biggest improvement in English tests, and in the last year, before we took the senior high school entrance exam, I became one ace student in English....

Jeff had vivid and positive memories of his first EFL teacher who was “very energetic and responsive”. The teacher used various techniques to evoke students’ interests in learning such as “playing cards with English words on them and giving big trophies to whoever made progress in English learning”. Jeff believed that “the fervor in learning English that developed during these three years proved to be [his] most precious treasure”.

This improvement actually inspired Jeff and helped him “overcome the anxiety and nervousness” he had when learning English in the beginning. In the following years, in senior-high, Jeff “felt more and more confident in English...and developed very strong grammatical skills and a fair vocabulary”.

Language learning became much more interesting and enjoyable after Jeff entered university. English learning in college involved “more freedom” and “became much more extensive and students were exposed to various learning activities”. In class, teachers no longer gave detailed explanation or analysis on everything. Instead, “students had to be very active and hardworking in order to pass the national CET (College English Test)”. Jeff also attended lectures given by native-speaking teachers although he was not an English major. These lectures, however, impressed him:

Their [native-speaking teachers’] pronunciation gave me a perfect example of native accent to imitate, and their approaches to teaching were very fresh... For me, I became aware of the differences between a Chinese English accent and a native English accent...This intrigued my further interest in learning English as a communication tool and in studying abroad in the future.

From the second year in university, Jeff involved himself in many out-of-class English learning activities, which, for him, were “more interesting, more versatile, and flexible in terms of time”. These experiences also turned out to be “a main part of” his EFL learning experiences. Realizing “the insufficiency of in-class EFL learning”, Jeff actively took part in various English speech contests and debates, listened to radio programs such as VOA (Voice of America) and BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), watched English movies and instructional TV programs, site-tutored visitors from English-speaking countries and also took informal oral-English classes. However, among

all of these out-of-class learning experiences, Jeff valued two special English learning experiences most. These experiences helped him “tremendously in building up language abilities and communication skills”. One was his eight years of experiences in English Corner (“a place where students come in to talk in English casually”):

From the first time I came to an English Corner in 1995...I insisted on going there once per week (except for holidays) and spent on average 2-3 hours there each time. You bet I improved a lot in communication skills, especially in both my listening and speaking skills. English Corner also made me more sociable and more willing to talk to other people. I also remembered that during 1995-1996, I attended an informal oral-English class and then kept practicing my spoken English (especially pronunciation). English Corner gave me a perfect place to do that and, gradually, I made a lot of progress during that period of time.

The other valuable experience involved playing English video games. “Unlike most EFL learners in China”, Jeff played a variety of English games and found this experience was “more beneficial than listening to VOA or watching movies in terms of EFL learning”. By playing English games, sometimes repeatedly, he was exposed to “a much wider range of original language use and the culture behind it”:

I remember that in GRE vocabulary there is one word “baron”, while the explanation given by the book is similar to “big and wealthy landlord”. The various games I’ve played told me the origin of this word and thus my understanding of this word is associated with the culture behind it.

Jeff also used one of his favorite games as another example:

One of my favorite games was ‘Civilizations’ which simulates the evolution of human histories, societies and numerous advances. I don’t think there has ever been any single book or radio program or movie that can match it in terms of so many English words involved and the different cultures of western countries you can experience with.

After he finished graduate school in 2000, Jeff became a full-time EFL teacher in university in China and taught non-English major freshmen and sophomores. In the

summer of 2001, Jeff participated in a teacher-education program which aimed to improve non-native Chinese EFL teachers' target language proficiency. The program was led by native-speaking teachers and involved various indoor activities such as discussion, dictation, and role-play as well as some informal outdoor gathering and communications. These experiences benefited Jeff in both his EFL teaching and learning:

Although I already knew the effectiveness of such activities for helping students with their EFL learning, I was still impressed by how much I myself actually enjoyed them and how much they could actually helped me to improve my proficiency in the language. After that, I organized a variety of activities in my own EFL teaching, some of which were based on what I experienced from the training.

In 2002, Jeff came to Canada to pursue a Ph.D. program. The language immersion experiences in an English-speaking country gave Jeff a completely different learning environment from what he experienced in China. He believed that most of the time, he improved his proficiency in the target language without "being aware of the learning" himself. However, he still could notice "big and steady progress" in vocabulary building through exposure to the culture of the target language as well as to various authentic materials:

Whenever I talked to native speakers I'd pay very attention to the different words they choose for certain situations, and I would compare them with my own choices afterwards. I continued doing this in these years and now their vocabulary is more readily mine...As for reading and writing, similarly, the experiences in reading and writing in different circumstances helped me improve my own reading and writing skills. And, of course, the improvement in vocabulary also contributed to improvements in reading and writing.

*Beliefs about EFL Teaching and Learning*

In the questionnaire, Jeff agreed with the statements “Language can be described as a set of behaviors which are mastered through lots of drill and practice with the language patterns of native speakers”, and “By understanding some of the basic grammatical rules of the language, learners can usually create lots of new sentences on their own. According to Jeff, this last statement “literally” describes “how a language comes into being”.

In the questionnaire, Jeff agreed that “It is very important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation”. He added that it is “especially so for those who are at the beginning of learning a new language”. However, in the focus group, he described the difficulties that Chinese learners face in learning English in a Chinese setting: “I believe for Chinese [EFL] students to learn how to pronounce properly is thousand times more difficult in China than in English-speaking nations”. He believes that this difficulty with pronunciation is due to the lack of “abundant native-English speakers”, “authentic materials” as well as the lack of a “good language learning environment” in China. Students therefore, “have no other choices but to imitate” their EFL teachers’ non-native pronunciation of the target language. This means that “many Chinese students have big difficulty in listening comprehension and speaking because they never really know how to pronounce properly”.

Jeff does not think that pronunciation has any relation to one’s fluency in the target language. However, it does “have a great influence on one’s listening and speaking abilities”. He noted that “Chinese people have their own first language, which is totally

alien to the Latin language family and [Chinese itself has] many many different dialects”. Therefore, that it is “extremely important” for Chinese EFL learners to speak English with native-like pronunciation and “if not, they run the risk of speaking a language only they can understand”. According to Jeff, “a native-like pronunciation will facilitate the communication between the speaker and other English-speaking people”. While “a very bad/odd pronunciation hinders their communication with even other Chinese students in English”. Additionally, Jeff believes that pronunciation is “not only important in real communication, but also important for building up one's own sense of confidence as a language user”. He explained,

A good pronunciation will give the learner a feeling that he/she is really speaking or using the language; while a bad one can easily make the learner feel out of place and soon lose interests in not only pronunciation but also other parts of EFL learning.

Regarding the role of communication, Jeff argued that “the primary purpose of language learning and teaching is to communicate”. He believes that “the best way to learn a language is to be born in its culture and communicate with native speakers”. Jeff’s responses to the questionnaire confirmed these beliefs as he agreed with such statements as “English can be thought of as meaningful communication”; “It is better to learn English in an English-speaking country”; “English is learned subconsciously in non-academic, social situations” and “It is more important to focus on communication than on grammar”.

In comparison, Jeff disfavored the EFL learning context in China. When recounting his in-class EFL learning experiences in China, he described the teaching as “restrictive” and “formal”; teaching materials were “limited”, “outdated” and “geared to

exams”, and the “exposure to the culture of English-speaking countries was very limited”. In the following excerpt, Jeff described how the EFL learning environment in China also affected the effectiveness of the English Corner, an out-of-class language learning activity:

It is not easy to find a good English speaker in English Corner in China...In fact, as in China there are not many native-speakers of English, Chinese students in English Corners do not have much access to native, original English, and many students gradually form their habits of thinking in Chinese and then do a translation when they speak English. As a result, when they really face native speakers they will have troubles in communication which can discourage them.

Jeff further described the importance of understanding the culture of the target language in EFL learning. Using vocabulary learning as an example, he explained: “I think a person will be able to choose the right word for communication in different contexts only when he/she has had enough exposure to the culture and has had enough experiences in thinking about/comparing different words”. Meanwhile, he believes that the various out-of-class language learning experiences were “very important in terms of understanding of the cultures behind the language”. Jeff agreed with the statement that “It is usually more important for students to focus on what they are trying to say and not how to say it”. He explained: “how to say is mostly decided by one's habits and his understanding/experience of the culture” and “the best way to improve how to say is more exposure to cultures”.

Jeff believes that “every EFL learner will experience some affective filter(s) when they begin to speak the [target] language”. However, he believes that it was his first EFL teachers' encouragement as well as his confidence gained through improvement in the target language learning that helped him “overcome the anxiety and nervousness”.

According to Jeff, “the fervor in learning English” that he developed during junior high school proved to be his “most precious treasure”. It was actually this interest in learning the target language that later pushed him to become an active English learner. Moreover, Jeff posited that a “relaxing environment as the one in English Corner” as well as “good pronunciation” could also contribute to “lowering the pressure one might encounter when speaking English”.

Jeff expressed contradictory beliefs about error correction in EFL teaching. When responding to the questionnaire, he agreed with the statement that “when students make oral errors, it is best to ignore them, as long as you can understand what they are trying to say”. However, when recounting his experiences in English Corner in the context of the focus group, he remarked that the lack of error correction may lead to bad habits and therefore is “one of the cons” of this out-of-class language learning activity:

As it [English Corner] is casual, no one is supposed to notify you when you make some mistakes in English, and as time goes on your mistakes can become unchangeable bad habits. If they are severe then they in return hinder you from communicating properly.

Similarly, Jeff believes that EFL learners in China should “learn native-like pronunciation from the beginning” because “to correct their already established ‘strong’ accent” would be the “most difficult of all”.

In the questionnaire, Jeff agreed with such beliefs about EFL teaching as “English should be the dominant language of instruction in effective EFL teaching practice”, and “Teachers should devote some time to teaching students how to use specific communication strategies such as circumlocution, approximation, gestures, etc”. These

beliefs can be validated by what he expressed in the context of the focus group as well as individual interviews. For example, he pointed out that the lack of attention to the cultivation of learners' communicative competence in EFL teaching is actually a flaw in the Chinese education system. He thus preferred the various out-of-class learning activities:

While it is commonly believed that students in China do not receive adequate training in communication skills, especially in speaking, there are various out-class activities aiming at improving communication skills, such as English Corners, English Columns and English Camping. Although these activities were still limited and could not give students enough training, they did show a simple and effective way for everyone to improve his/her communication skills.

In spite of his belief in the importance of communication, Jeff agreed with questionnaire items such as "It is important to provide clear, frequent and precise presentations of grammatical structures during language instruction" and "The teacher needs to break down the language into sizable parts that the students can grasp bit by bit". In the context of the focus group, when recounting his in-class English learning experiences, he remarked that the solid background he developed in grammar and vocabulary in high school not only helped his "adaptation to the new learning environment in university", but also helped him "build up more confidence in EFL learning, especially in speaking the target language".

Jeff argued that learners' needs "should always be stressed in EFL teaching". According to him, "one of the cons" of the "strictness and formality in Chinese EFL classroom" is that teachers do not know students' interests and needs. He noted that because "different people have different views of a language and expectations of their

own language proficiency”, it is important for teachers to help students “with their own goals (especially for College students and mature students)”:

I mentioned this mainly because in China, teaching and learning is much less flexible than in western developed countries and in many cases students are not even allowed to have or think about their actual goals of EFL learning. But on the other hand, to help students to set up their EFL goals and feed them with what they actually need is the best way to educate them, at least psychologically.

Jeff disfavored the strictness of in-class instruction as “teachers would be authoritative and would play a dominant role” while students “were supposed to pay attention...obey rules, and not ask questions unless teachers said so”. He noted further that “well learner-centered teaching will be the most effective way of EFL teaching and learning”, in which “the role of EFL teachers should be more of a helper than an instructor”:

A helper needs to know what he/she can help with. The more details he/she knows about individual students, the more he/she can help. But in China, many EFL teachers are just instructing without thinking too much of the individual students’ need. To change them from instructor to helper, they need not only think about the need of different students, but also listen to and talk to them...that is, interact with them.

In addition, Jeff expressed concerns about the education system as well as the EFL curriculum in China. He argued that formal EFL teaching in China was, and actually still is, “strict”, mostly “exam-gearred” and based on “outdated textbooks” as well as “limited authentic materials”. As a result, students, “gradually lost their activeness in language learning... they were so used to being taught what to do and what not to do, what to learn and what not to learn”. Teachers, on the other hand, “were not given much freedom” to choose their own teaching materials and teaching approaches in the classroom because the EFL curriculum is not only “exam-oriented” and neglects learners’

needs, but also “not well-balanced”. To a large extent, “the development of communication skills (esp. speaking and listening) is ignored”. Jeff remarked that:

EFL teaching in China was obviously lack of fundamental communication skills for most students. After graduating from college, students would find that what they learned in EFL classes in China were not only limited but also somewhat misleading. Some of them might even regret that they spent so much time learning old-fashioned grammars and words.

Jeff therefore believes that there is “really a need to improve the education system”. He also pointed out some of its shortcomings as follows:

1 ) Outdated materials and beliefs in EFL, lack of up-to-date information and research in EFL; 2) Lack of flexibility, teachers and students lack of communication and interaction; 3 ) Teaching structure is not well-balanced, development of communication skills (especially speaking and listening) is ignored, and the need of using EFL as a language tool is not met.

Moreover, Jeff noted that “personally, I feel the knowledge flow within the Chinese English teaching and learning system was quite insulated and needed to be more open to various ways of EFL learning and teaching”. He added that teachers, in these circumstances, “should be required to have more modern training such as in psychology and curriculum design, in order to be able to make such a flexible, open and interactive way of teaching”.

When responding to the questionnaire, Jeff also agreed with statements such as “Problem-solving is an important part of teaching English as a foreign language” as well as “Teamwork and collaborative skills are important in the learning of English”. However, these beliefs did not re-emerge either in the context of focus group or in the individual interviews.

“Education makes people what they are.” In this regard, Jeff commented that how he taught “was a rather comprehensive outcome of not only [his] own language learning experiences but also many other things that [he] learned from university, high schools or even secondary/primary schools”. He noted that, although there were some bad influences on his own English teachers on his beliefs about EFL teaching and learning, the overall influence was “positive”. He thinks that both of his in-class and out-of-class language learning experiences had influences on his own beliefs. Although the ratio of these influences, according to him, is half to half; he believes that many of his EFL experiences beyond schooling were actually provoked by his first EFL teacher. The following excerpt describes how he perceives the relationship between his personal language learning and beliefs about EFL teaching and learning:

What is the best way to learn vocabulary and grammar? How to read English articles quickly and effectively? What is the coolest approach of improving my listening and oral English? How often should I review my notes? What kind of materials besides compulsory textbooks I should use? And many more...All these questions that we would have during our own EFL learning would once again come to us when we teach. So actually our teaching would be influenced by the answers we had for these questions, which most likely were formed up during our own schooling under the influences (we may not be aware at all) of our EFL teachers. For instance, when thinking about how to encourage students, I would again go back to our own schooling experiences and work it out based on our own judgment which teacher/which teaching style encouraged me the most.

### *Profile of Laura*

#### *LLEs*

Laura is a 37 year old research scholar in the United States. Before going to the States, she spent more than 15 years teaching EFL in China. She began studying English

in junior high school. According to Laura, there was a lack of sufficient teaching and learning resources at that time. Students had only one or two reference books as well as textbooks that “focused on drills, grammar rules and exercises”. All of Laura’s EFL high school teachers “attached great importance to grammar teaching”. They “interpreted the grammatical rules to students patiently and set a lot of examples”. Chinese was the only language used in class. Teachers “translated the drills one by one and the text sentence by sentence”. Students were required to do “a lot of homework on grammar”. Although such exercises were “very boring”, Laura thinks they helped her “to grasp the English grammar well”.

Laura was interested in learning English from the very beginning and therefore worked very hard at it. She recalled her English teacher who offered her great help at the time and often lent her some authentic books and tapes. However, because of the lack of learning resources, Laura had very few opportunities for out-of-class language learning during her secondary schooling except for radio:

I remember at the time there was no television in my family but we had a radio. I liked to listen to the radio. I listened to an English program in radio. It was not VOA or BBC. It was just a very simple English program, which taught me how to read and write English. Compared with today’s English programs, it was very boring but I think it was very helpful for me.

“The situation changed a little” when Laura entered university in 1986. She was a non-English major in the beginning. At that time, she did not have native-speaking teachers; rather, all EFL teachers were Chinese. The following excerpt describes Laura’s EFL learning experiences at the time:

When I studied English as a law student, our English course was called College English. Generally it was made up of different branches such as intensive reading, extensive reading, fast reading and listening... The teachers all paid more attention to intensive reading. They explained the meaning and usage of each new word to us. They read new words and text to us and let us follow them to read. I had no oral classes. I didn't know how to speak English at all.

Two years later, Laura changed her major to English. It is from then on that she got more comprehensive training in the target language. Every semester, she took courses offered by native-speaking teachers such as oral English, audio-visual class, and sometimes writing class. Laura had many opportunities to practice and improve her oral English in classes where English was the only language of communication.

Laura also recounted personal difficulties during this period when she had just become an English major. She felt very “self-conscious”, worried about “making mistakes” and being “looked down upon by classmates”. For this reason, as she noted, “I always sat mute in my English class”. Fortunately, after a period of adaptation, she “got used to English major study” and began to “practice English more and more after class”. Laura made gradual progress in English, gained her self-confidence and thus began to enjoy her English classes.

She listed a number of positive out-of-class activities in which she took part while in university. One of these experiences involved reading authentic stories:

One day I went to bookstore and found a book named “100 Bible Stories”. I was deeply attracted by the language and the stories inside. But I had no money to buy it, so after class I went to that bookstore and read the stories in it. When I finished reading the 100 stories I found my English vocabulary was enlarged unexpectedly.

She also described experiences of story-retelling and peer-practice and remarked that whenever she read an interesting English story, she would retell it in her own words either to herself or to her friends. These experiences helped her “to know how to express [her]self more clearly”. Another out-of-class learning experience involved practicing oral English with a friend:

The time for us to practice English in class is very limited so I reached an agreement with one of my friends: every evening after the supper, we would have a walk for one hour and speak English to each other. We talked about everything we were interested in. When we practiced we tried to use the expressions and vocabulary that we had just learned in and out of class.

Laura also experimented with listening to the radio as a means of improving her comprehension. She observed that her listening skills were “very poor at the beginning”. Following her teacher’s advice, she began to listen to VOA programs on radio, first to ‘Special English’, then to standard ones. The method proved to be “really beneficial” to improve her listening skills in the target language. Another opportunity that she took advantage of to improve her English skills involved socializing with English speakers:

When I studied at university, every semester we had at least two native-speaking teachers. On every weekend they would hold English parties. They invited some of their friends to their apartments and provided drinks and sorts of snacks. We listened to music together. We discussed all different kinds of topics together. I liked it very much because we could communicate in English in a very relaxed environment.

There were also experiences of watching authentic English movies, joining in English Corner and English diary writing. According to Laura, all these experiences were positive and have helped her learn English.

When Laura was a graduate student, she audited all the lectures that were presented in English. This experience was “very valuable which not only enlarged [her] range of knowledge but also improved [her] English proficiency, especially [her] listening skills”. Laura has now been in an English-speaking country for three months. Her current research area is Law instead of language learning. However, she continues to try various ways to improve her language proficiency:

I try to communicate with people from different countries. In this way I can get used to different accents. In addition, I often go to some American families to know their life and culture. I like to go to the parks and when I meet some people there I will talk with them.

#### *Beliefs about EFL Teaching and Learning*

Laura agreed with the statement in the questionnaire that “English can be thought of as meaningful communication” and therefore she indicated that “It is more important to focus on communication than on grammar”. Her comments in the context of the focus group confirmed such beliefs as she noted that “the purpose of English learning is to communicate with others in English...To only grasp the grammatical rules is useless”. Laura also agreed with the statement that “It is better to learn English in an English-speaking country”. She further explained that, in English-speaking countries, “most of the people are native speakers of the language” and it thus is “very easy for the English learners to find a person to practice English with”. She added that “living in an English-speaking country, the learner will encounter a lot of difficulties. If they want to solve the problems, they have to communicate or consult with others in English. In this context, English is very authentic and idiomatic”. In this regard, Laura commented that “problem-

solving is an important part in EFL teaching and learning...If learners don't know how to use the target language to solve problems, English learning is meaningless and useless”.

Laura believes that effective language instruction requires use of authentic materials as well as use of English as the language of instruction. She asserts that “only with authentic materials”, can EFL learners “learn how to use the language in real, authentic situations”. Laura believes that teachers should devote some time to teaching students how to use specific communication strategies such as circumlocution, approximation and gestures. In addition, as language learning is for communication, teachers should focus on what students are trying to say instead of how they say it. When students make oral errors, it is also best to ignore them, as long as what they are trying to say can be understood.

Laura expressed her beliefs about the importance of teamwork and collaborative skills in the learning of English. She noted:

To learn English by oneself is very boring sometimes. If learners can study English in a team and develop some collaborative skills, it will be very beneficial. In this way, English learning is full of fun and will be very interesting. Also, learners [in the group] can help each other, encourage each other and thus make progress together.

Laura emphasized five factors that are important in EFL learning: 1) starting at an early age; 2) having a good memory; 3) not being afraid of making mistakes; 4) possessing a strong ability to imitate and 5) having enough learning resources. In the following excerpt, she explains why these factors are important to her:

Now I admire the kids who have chances to study English in their primary school because they have good memory and they are too little to be afraid of making mistakes. If a person wants to learn a new language, one point is very important,

namely, don't be afraid of making mistakes...In addition, kids have strong abilities to imitate. They can imitate the pronunciation and accent etc. Also, today kids have a lot of learning resources, such as radio program, TV program, DVD, VCD, MP3 and all kinds of books in English, which could not be imagined by me when I began to study English in 1970s. I think teaching and learning resources are very important for us to learn English well.

Additionally, Laura believes that "the best way for Chinese EFL learners to deal with affective factors is to keep a balance between the input and output of the target language":

Of course input is important. That is to say, students sitting in class and listening to the teacher and other students is important. I don't want to deny the importance of output. Practice makes perfect. More output can help learners to be more active in language learning and also become more competent in using the language.

Although Laura had various out-of-class language learning experiences, she believes that in-class learning is "the most important part of the language learning, especially for Chinese students". She noted:

We learn the basic listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in class. Without the in-class foundation we can not build up the skeleton for our language learning...Obviously, based on what we have learned in class can we learn more beyond class.

In the questionnaire, Laura agreed with the statement that "If students understand some of the basic grammatical rules of the language, they can usually create lots of new sentences on their own". She expressed similar beliefs later in the context of the focus group and individual interviews. Taking her own language learning as an example, Laura noted that grammar learning and repeated exercises in high school were "necessary" and "built the foundation" for her further learning of the target language. However, she does not think this is the only way to teach English. She argues that "besides grammar

learning, teachers should give students more chances to speak, listen to and use the language”. In the following excerpt, she explains how her teachers’ teaching styles affected the performance of their students:

In secondary school, my English teachers liked to translate almost all the sentences into Chinese. We students also formed that habit. This was very negative for us to learn English. Once we form the habit we want to translate it into Chinese whenever we see any English sentence. It seemed that only by doing so could we understand it.

In the following excerpt, she explains how her own students affected her teaching style:

In early 1990s...most of my students were not good at English, especially in speaking and listening. For them it was impractical for me to teach in the target language. I tried but failed. My students told me that they couldn’t understand and they didn’t like that way. I changed accordingly. I taught them how to pronounce, how to apply the grammatical rules and how to translate sentences/texts from English into Chinese and vice versa. I required them to recite the new words and some paragraphs in each unit. They obeyed me and they thought they made progress...From around year 2000, I found my students were better at English than before. They were very active in class and most of them had strong motivation and desire to express their ideas on different topics in English. I gave them more chances to practice oral English in class and while teaching I used target language as much as possible. They had team work, pair work, speech or debating. They liked the various in-class activities very much.

In the questionnaire, Laura agreed with the statement that “Instructional goals should be consistent with the learner’s goal”. She made similar comments in the context of the focus group and also posits that her beliefs about EFL teaching and learning have a close relationship with her own language learning experiences. Moreover, she noted that these learning experiences also affected her teaching approaches:

After I became a teacher, I met different types of students who had different expectations from me. Some of were not good at some basic skills of English such as grammar and pronunciation. For this kind of students I would help them in

these fields because when I began to study English I wanted my teachers to interpret the grammatical rules as clearly as possible. But for some advanced students I would give them more chances to practice in listening and speaking because when I was a student and believed I had grasped the grammatical rules and enough vocabulary, I wanted my teachers to give me more chances to use English to express my idea on different topics/issues.

The following excerpt illustrates how Laura's out-of-class language learning experiences affected her as an EFL teacher:

I learned a lot from my various out-of-class language learning experiences and after I become a teacher I recommend some effective learning methods to my students, especially to my advanced students. I asked them to read original English works, listen to English programs, go to English corners, and to make friends with native English speakers. They accepted my advice and made progress.

### *Profile of Linda*

#### *LLEs*

Linda is 37 years old and has taught EFL in a Chinese university for 16 years. Meanwhile, she has been doing some administrative work in the faculty for more than five years. Linda began to learn English at the age of 11 when she entered junior high school. Like most EFL learners in China, she learned the language in class. However, what really aroused her interest in learning a foreign language at the very beginning was her respect for her uncle who is a linguist. Linda's first EFL teacher soon found that she was always a quick learner of the language. In the second year of junior high school, Linda took part in an English contest and won the first-class award. She was "encouraged a lot" and "began to believe that [she] had some talent in English learning".

Linda had very positive memories of her first EFL teacher, who had “relatively standard English pronunciation” and was very kind to Linda. Compared to the English teacher she had in senior high school, Linda obviously preferred this first one because the teacher “was very dynamic”. Linda’s English classes in senior high school focused on grammar and vocabulary learning. Her new teacher was “not so lovely” because, as Linda explained, she “always wrote the grammatical rules on the blackboard and asked us to put them down as well in our notes”.

Linda was a very quiet girl in class. She described herself as an “introvert”. She remarked that “I’m always silent. I don’t talk too much in Chinese, let alone in English”. During the six years in secondary school, Linda “never had the chance to even listen to an authentic tape” but “only followed [her] teacher’s pronunciation of the target language”. As a result, when entering university, she soon realized that her “oral English was not as good as” some other students. She became less motivated than she was in high school. She majored in English at university but still remained very shy even in the oral English class offered by native-speaking teachers:

I was still very shy. I seldom opened my mouth in the classroom, esp. the oral English class...I wanted to talk with them [native-speaking English teachers] but my tongue did not permit me to do so. I spent my time in the oral English class in panic. Only a few of us who were good at [English] speaking enjoyed it...Most of us kept silent or spoke short, broken English in class.

A top student in reading, writing as well as translation of the target language, Linda was worried about her speaking and listening abilities. Her uncle once advised her to listen daily to BBC programs on the radio and even sent her a package of listening materials. However, Linda was too anxious at the time to follow her uncle’s advice. She

did not think that she could catch up with the top students in a short period. One year before graduation, Linda became more anxious and began to imitate the standard pronunciation of the tapes of some listening materials. Although this method greatly helped her EFL learning, Linda was still not satisfied with her pronunciation and communication skills.

Linda's anxiety continued even after she graduated from university. Her new identity as an EFL teacher soon forced her to shrug off her timidity and communicate in the target language. The experiences of "standing behind the podium" proved to be her "most valuable out-of-class experience". When recounting this experience, Linda remarked that: "once I opened my mouth, I found that I was not a very slow learner in English speaking or listening. I gained my confidence". Thereafter, Linda has been keeping "frequent contact with native-speaking teachers as well as scholars for international academic exchanges".

"Like most EFL learners in China", Linda enjoys audio-video materials very much. She also likes reading a lot, "on various subjects" and "either in English or in Chinese":

Personally, I hated doing too many multiple choices...I hated distinguishing the subtle differences between synonyms. My interest lies in knowing about the English-speaking countries' culture, customs, politics, education as well as economy, which I think are different from China. Of course, the most attractive one for me is its literature.

#### *Beliefs about EFL Teaching and Learning*

Linda agreed with the statement that "English can be thought of as meaningful communication". She believes that learning a language is for communication. Therefore,

teachers should “encourage students to be engaged in communication rather than pay attention to grammar”. Otherwise, as Linda remarked, “students can not enjoy English learning and they will feel frustrated after learning for many years but fail in real communication”. In the questionnaire, Linda also agreed with the statement that “It is better to learn English in an English-speaking country”. She further explained this belief in the context of the focus group and noted that “it is very important for English learners to have an immersion experience...or students will never have an opportunity to learn real English and experience real English culture”.

According to Linda, teaching EFL is very different from teaching English as one's mother tongue or as a second language: “Teachers must follow the prescribed curricula in a relatively strict way. Otherwise, the students cannot improve their competence in the target language comprehensively”. As an example, she referred to oral English, a course usually offered by native-speaking teachers in universities:

Every year, native-speaking teachers come to our university to teach oral English. Usually their teaching is free of prescribed curriculum. At the beginning, students think that their classes are very interesting. However, with time passing by, students often feel they cannot get as much as they expect in such classes.

Linda expressed seemingly contradictory beliefs about teaching English in a non-native speaking country, i.e., in an EFL context. In the context of the focus group as well as individual interviews she argued that the primary purpose of EFL teaching is to communicate in the target language: “Teachers should ignore students’ oral errors as long as what students are trying to say can be understood”. She believes that with an overemphasis on correction, “students will lose confidence in themselves and

retreat from the class". Her responses to the questionnaire confirm such beliefs. For instance, she strongly agreed with statements such as "Effective language instruction incorporates authentic materials" and "In effective foreign language instruction, some time is devoted to teaching students how to use specific communication strategies (e.g., circumlocution, approximation, gestures)".

On the other hand, however, Linda believes that because EFL learning normally "lacks a favorable environment"; students have to improve their English through repetition. In this regard, she agreed with the statements in the questionnaire that "Language can be described as a set of behaviors which are mastered through lots of drill and practice with the language patterns of native speakers" and "It is important to provide clear, frequent, precise presentations of grammatical structures during language instruction". Linda finally concluded in the focus group with her beliefs about different EFL teaching approaches:

I don't object to the traditional way of teaching English such as grammar and translation oriented approaches, reciting or memorizing....I believe that grammar-translation approach and communicative approach play an equal role in EFL teaching because of their respective advantages and disadvantages. "Whether it is a black cat or a white cat, as long as it can catch the mouse, it is a good cat." - coined by Deng, Xiaoping.

Linda believes that personality "has great influence on one's oral ability in the target language". She commented that a good EFL teacher needs to "interact with students very often and recommend to them various ways to improve English". Also, a good EFL teacher should encourage students to be more "active and out-going" and "help them get rid of their foreign-language-phobia". According to Linda, the teacher is the

most important factor in EFL learning, especially at a time when no sufficient learning materials are available. In particular, the first EFL teacher can be so important that he/she “somewhat shapes the learner's life interests in English and decides one’s later performance in the target language”. Linda remarked that “how to motivate students to learn English is a big problem in EFL teaching” and she also believes that “only those students who are interested in learning English should be taught”.

Linda also emphasized the importance of native-like pronunciation in EFL learning and teaching. When recounting her experiences as a beginning English learner, Linda noted that “once you decide to learn English, you learn standard pronunciation. Otherwise you would not be understood by native speakers and you would not understand native speakers, either”. She took her own experiences as an example:

I was lucky enough to have an English teacher who had relatively standard English pronunciation...Otherwise I would have been speaking English with some kind of dialect. I guess during that time a lot of students did not have such good luck to speak acceptable English.

At the same time, however, Linda believes strongly in the importance of communication:

There is a tendency which Chinese EFL learners should be careful not to follow: we Chinese EFL learners have so different pronunciation system in our mother tongue that we ignore the core function of learning a foreign language -- sound communication. EFL teachers should be careful not to follow this tendency either. In the classroom, we're supposed to encourage our students to speak more, to be original, and to be creative. We are not training broadcasting announcers. We teach students English because we want them to exchange their ideas with people all over the world...A lot of Chinese people speak very beautiful English but they have very little to say. What a pity! I strongly recommend that we English teachers teach our students how to have cross-cultural communication in business and academy, how to be original in expressing ideas.

Linda emphasized the importance of reading in gaining competency in the language. She argued that “only through a great amount of reading can an English learner grasp what is good English, write idiomatically, learn to think in the target language and communicate with English users freely”. In this regard, she reflected on the type of teacher she would like to have had: “If I had choice of my own teacher, I wish that my English teacher would force me to read more original works on different topics, such as history, politics, philosophy, literature, etc.”

While she believes that reading is important, she also emphasized the role of listening to authentic materials: “An English learner can't make real progress in speaking and listening if he or she does not finish listening to a certain number of authentic tapes [of the target language]”. She believes this is particularly so when the learner “lives in a country where not too many people use English as an official language or even as a second language”. She therefore posits that the learning of listening and speaking in the target language is “the biggest obstacle” for Chinese EFL learners, “even when learners today can resort to various audio and video facilities”. Linda explains:

There are two reasons for this phenomenon: one [reason] is that high school students don't have much time spending on listening to and speaking [the target language] due to heavy classwork and homework...Even a grade 7 student, like my son, goes to school for five and half a day each week, getting up at six thirty and going back home at seven and then contributing usually 2 hours on homework. I wanted to ask my son to listen to some [English] tapes but I felt he was too tired, so I gave up. Another [reason] is that students from high schools in rural areas... don't have access to audio and video materials.

Linda expressed concerns about the education system as well as the EFL curriculum in China. She posits that the reform of the exam-oriented education system “is

the most urgent for any course's teaching and learning, particularly for EFL teaching and learning". The following excerpt vividly describes what Linda thinks of the current education system in relation to the EFL teaching and learning in China:

The English test for the college entrance exam only gives 20 scores for listening, naught for speaking. Under this circumstance, why should college candidates make great efforts in improving their listening and speaking? They only need to work hard on reading, grammar and structure...Students immerse themselves in multiple choices, matching, rearranging order of given sentences, which I think belong to passive exercises. The great amount of "passive exercises" deviates the main purpose of learning a foreign language...What's more, somewhat, Band 4 and 6 [College English Exam] leads our English teaching. Similarly, there are only 20 scores given to listening...I can say 80% students' incompetence in listening to and speaking is attributed to the current education system. If high school students have more free time, they have more chances to resort to audio and video materials. If the current exam-oriented system were reformed, students would have more active exercises, such as extensive reading, listening, thinking, writing and expressing themselves.

Linda depicted her image of effective evaluation in Chinese EFL curriculum:

If I were asked to prepare a test paper to test a candidate's English level, three parts should be involved: listening ability, 100 scores; speaking ability, 100 scores; and writing ability, 100 scores. The average score can reflect the candidate's real English proficiency.

Additionally, Linda believes there is a close relationship between her own language learning experiences and her beliefs about EFL teaching and learning. She remarked that "my EFL learning experiences, of course, affected my EFL teaching greatly... Like father, like son. Like teachers, like students". In this regard, she added that "a teacher's teaching method will greatly influence his or her students' teaching method".

When responding to the questionnaire, Linda agreed with such statements as "Problem-solving is an important part of teaching English as a foreign language", "Teamwork and collaborative skills are important in the learning of English", as well as

“Instructional goals should be consistent with the learner’s goal”. However, these beliefs did not re-emerge either in the context of the focus group or individual interviews.

### *Profile of Vincent*

#### *LLEs*

Vincent is 41 years old with 14 years of EFL teaching experiences in China. He began to learn EFL when he was in junior high school. He recounted his in-class learning during the time as “totally controlled by teachers with focus on analysis of texts and explanation of language points. There was no use of the target language in class. Listening and speaking was virtually ignored”.

In the last year of his study in secondary school, Vincent “formally turned to English as a major, in an effort to pass the College Entrance Examination”. To achieve this goal, Vincent began to learn English grammar systematically by himself and did relevant exercises at the same time. He had a “strong interest in English grammar.” The pleasure that learning grammar brought him was “even greater than that from reading a fascinating novel or watching a gorgeous movie”. The following excerpt describes Vincent’s learning experiences at that time:

During one year, I studied two schools of grammar at the same time: traditional grammar [pioneered] by Daozhen Zhang, a leading expert in this field; and modern grammar [pioneered] by Zhenbang Zhang, another authoritative expert. Amazingly, within one year I got an excellent command of English grammar, and this laid solid foundations for my future study. I really benefited since I scored high in the College Entrance Examination and English was always the highest among several courses at college.

Vincent continued his EFL learning as an English major in university. The in-class learning experiences were similar to those he had in high school, with teachers being the center and analysis of texts and explanation of language points being the focus of teaching. During the four years in university, Vincent spent more time learning the language autonomously after class. He memorized a large amount of vocabulary and phrases as well as expressions. He read more extensively and, by listening to BBC and VOA programs through radio, his listening ability “improved dramatically at the same time”. Although Vincent also practiced his oral English with both native and non-native speakers, he was “much less motivated” by such activity. When recounting his language learning experiences, Vincent noted that verbal ability is an aspect ignored in his learning. He remarked:

In high school, as [EFL] learning didn't have to involve oral expression, I attached little importance to it. During my four-year study at college, as there was no interaction in classroom teaching and there was no atmosphere either out of class, my verbal ability was not ideally developed. It [verbal ability] could hardly be at a time when it was not much valued.

After working as an EFL teacher, Vincent participated in various academic seminars but few teacher education programs. He was used to improving his proficiency in the target language by himself. Vincent noted that, while teaching, he learned a lot from analyzing “the reasons, characteristics and regularity of different errors” made by his students in their writing practice. The experience also helped make his instruction of EFL writing “much more efficient”.

Vincent took an in-service leave and had one-year learning experiences in an English speaking country. He remarked that he was “highly motivated” in such “natural

learning”. Besides “attending lectures”, “exchanging academic views” and “communicating daily with native speakers”, he had other language immersion experiences in this period as well. The following excerpt illustrates these experiences as well as some of Vincent feelings toward them:

I stayed in Oxford University for one year and really benefited much. I compared the speeches from different nations and also the accents from different parts of Britain. I chose to stay in Britain because I prefer British accent and I was interested in the history of Britain as well as the whole European continent...I liked to observe the way they speak. I also spent much time in London since it was just one-hour ride from Oxford. It gave me much pleasure to listen to them speak. But unfortunately I was too old to imitate them.

#### *Beliefs about EFL Teaching and Learning*

When responding to the questionnaire, Vincent agreed with statements such as “English can be thought of as meaningful communication”, “It is better to learn English in an English-speaking country”, as well as, “English is learned subconsciously in non-academic, social situations”. Later in the context of the focus group and individual interviews, he confirmed such beliefs. He noted that he agreed with: “what the Constructivists said about learning, that is, language is not acquired through teaching but through the learner’s interaction with his environment”. He also remarked that “learning is far from acquisition”. He took his own language learning as an example: “after graduation from the college, I realized that although I had a large vocabulary [in English], I could not speak the language freely. I can write correctly but not satisfactorily”.

Vincent believes that age is an important factor in language learning. When reflecting on his experiences in the English-speaking country, he regarded himself too old to “imitate” the way native speakers communicate to each other. Meanwhile, he believes

that an earlier age the learner access to a second/foreign language, the sooner he or she can acquire it. He remarked, “I noticed that young Chinese learned to speak English much more quickly. My 7-year-old daughter began to communicate freely with the native kids only after staying in the primary school [in Britain] for 4 months”.

Vincent agreed with the statements in the questionnaire that “It is more important to focus on communication than on grammar”, “Usually it is more important for students to focus on what they are trying to say and not how to say it”, and “When students make oral errors, it is best to ignore them, as long as you can understand what they are trying to say”. He also expressed similar beliefs in the context of the focus group and individual interviews. As Vincent noted, “I usually do not correct errors occurred in students’ oral practice unless communication is seriously impaired”. Additionally, he remarked that “using the language constantly” and developing language awareness are the “most essential elements in language learning”. Moreover, he expressed firm beliefs in the effectiveness of both Tracy Terrel's Natural Approach and the Communicative Approach in classroom teaching. In his own teaching, “only the target language is used so as to provide as much input as possible”.

When responding to the questionnaire, Vincent also agreed that “Learning English as a foreign language in China is mostly a matter of learning grammar rules” and “If students understand some of the basic grammatical rules of the language, they usually can create lots of new sentences on their own”. “Objectively speaking”, as he explained in the context of the focus group, “the grammar-translation teaching approach contributed considerably to the cultivation of students’ writing and reading skills”:

Several years ago when our teaching was test-oriented (National College English Test), we placed the Grammar-Translation Method in the first place and actually we had to. Then almost half of our time in the classroom we used mother tongue and our teaching centered around the study of grammatical rules and the cultivation of students' listening, reading and writing skills. Normally through two years of training, students' skills in dealing with tests rose dramatically and some of them got incredibly high scores in the TOEFL.

According to Vincent, communicative competence in the target language should be developed in the limited class sessions. Therefore, "it is very important to create a natural learning setting in the classroom so that the learners will feel more motivated instead of being inhibited in using the language". He firmly believes that effective teaching should be learner-centered with instructional goals consistent with the learner's goal, which also validates his responses to the questionnaire. Vincent took his own in-class language learning experiences as a negative example. He noted that, like "the majority of Chinese EFL learners", he is "the victim of the traditional in-class language learning in China":

In the classroom which required strict discipline and inflexible procedures, I received little attention but rather, regular attention was required. My teachers, all forged in the Cultural Revolution, looked stern and I had to absolutely follow their teaching. This teacher-centered learning could only be a one-way communication; it concentrated on form and didn't encourage or permit free use of the language to exchange messages. I could neither communicate nor figure out my own ideas. I felt extremely bored and inhibited. I took "defensive learning" and was careful so as not to make mistakes.

Vincent believes that the traditional in-class instruction in China had both pros and cons. In terms of the former, such teacher-centered, grammar-translation based teaching provided "high efficiency in the learning of structures as well as the improving of reading

and writing skills. However, it had “really low efficiency in the fostering of learners’ verbal skills [of the target language]”.

Vincent believes that “autonomous learning and individualized learning play a very important role in foreign language learning”. He argued that this is especially so when the development of learners’ skills in listening, reading and grammar is concerned. He believes that the degree a learner accesses autonomous learning is related to his or her personality. Vincent used his own experience as an example when he remarked that “I believe I achieved more and enjoyed more out of class than in the classroom, which most probably resulted from my character since I taught myself more easily and quickly than others did me”.

Vincent commented that it is important for the teacher to follow the prescribed curriculum and normally, “teaching approaches vary according to the different aims of teaching”. Using the communicative competence as an example, Vincent doesn’t believe it can be developed “at a time when it was not much valued” in the curriculum. He remarked that:

As our teaching curriculum, both [designed] by the government and by local administrators, attached little importance to the students’ verbal ability, our classroom teaching and learning involved virtually no use of the target language. And this might well account for the fact that although most of the students have studied English for several years, they can not speak it freely. Of course, it is not the teaching approach that is to blame since the teachers did what was required.

When responding to the questionnaire, Vincent agreed with such statements as “Problem-solving is an important part of teaching English as a foreign language” and “Teamwork and collaborative skills are important in the learning of English”. In terms of the latter, he expressed a similar belief in the context of the focus group. Vincent

reflected on his teaching practice and, in order to improve students' collaborative skills in language learning, he "usually designed various situations or tasks for students to talk freely in pairs or groups".

Vincent believes that his personal language learning experiences are closely related to his beliefs about EFL teaching and learning in China:

I prefer this approach (Communicative/Natural Approach) because my out-of-class learning experiences led me to believe that, for foreign language learners, skills in listening, reading [of the target language] as well as grammar learning can be cultivated more effectively out of class; while communicative competence should be developed in the limited class sessions. And I feel that autonomous learning and individualized learning play a very important role in foreign language learning since my out-of-class learning experience proved that I can achieve much more out of class than in class and this feeling was further strengthened by my belief in the theory of Constructivism. I take this approach also because my in-class learning experiences showed me that if classroom teaching is too formal, learners will be less motivated and less desired to communicate [in the target language] and this will inevitably result in lower efficiency in language learning.

#### *Profile of Daisy*

##### *LLEs*

Daisy is 37-years old and has 16 years' experience teaching EFL in China. For the first five years, she taught in a high school whereas she now teaches at a university. Daisy began learning English in junior high school and was very interested in language learning from the very beginning. She remembers that, in all six years of high school, her teachers had been "urging" students to recite everything they learned: "drills", "texts" and "many grammar rules". Daisy was "so interested" in the target language that she

would “like to follow whatever teachers asked [students] to do”. Therefore, she liked reciting. Until recently, Daisy believed that the experience helped her learn English.

Daisy did not have any out-of-class English learning experiences in junior high school and textbooks were the only learning resources she could access at the time. While in the final year of her high school, she watched a popular English program on TV every day after class. In the following excerpt, she describes this experience:

The program consisted of certain units; each unit [was] based on a topic by a short play, acted by native-speakers with a real-world communication. After I entered university, I owed a great deal to this program whenever I got high marks in listening comprehension. I also benefited a lot from the program in oral English. I learned much on how to communicate with others under different situations in [the] real world. The first English program impressed me so much that till now I could still remember the man with the name Frances Mathew in the play.

According to Daisy, things changed after she enrolled as an English major in university. Her language learning experiences at this level were “quite different” from those in high school. The following excerpt describes this experience:

University life was quite different from that in secondary school in that: it was the first time we had contact with foreigners; it was the first time English was the only language used in class; it was the first we had the chance to watch original English films; and it was the first time we knew programs on radio such as BBC and VOA.

What impressed Daisy most about this experience was her audio-visual class and oral English class. In every audio-visual class, the teacher would play 15-minute fragments of original English movies. Daisy recounted that these minutes of the class were “the happiest time” for her. She remarked:

In this way, we were exposed to the real world of native-English. I liked it, not only because I could listen to native English, but also because in this way I got to know the outer world, how people felt about the world around them.

The oral English class was given by native-speaking teachers. Students were often divided into groups and had free talk on given subjects. The teacher would also bring other teaching materials to the class besides textbooks. English was the only language being used and “if someone spoke any language other than English in class, he or she would be punished”. Daisy liked the class very much and tried her best to communicate with the native teachers in class “as much as possible”. The following excerpt presents Daisy’s recollections of her experiences in this class:

Sometimes, the teacher brought some pictures to the class and distributed four or five [pictures] to each group randomly. Then we were asked to make up a story with the pictures... That was interesting class indeed and really amused us a lot at that time. The most interesting moment was when each group shared the stories with others. The scene is still in my mind now.

As an English major, Daisy was also asked by her teachers to listen to VOA or BBC programs on radio to improve her listening skill. Daisy recounted: “at that time, each of us had a radio with short waves. The first thing to do every day was to listen to the news of VOA or BBC, first beginning with Special English, then to standard ones”. Daisy believes this was a “really a good way” to develop listening skills.

In addition, Daisy followed her teachers’ suggestions and did a lot of out-of-class reading in the target language. The reading materials were mostly authentic and ranged from newspapers and magazines to original novels as well as Shakespeare’s work. Daisy also participated once or twice in the out-of-class activity: English Corner. However, she did not like it because she found that she could not learn much from other participants and she was not a very active speaker. Comparatively, Daisy preferred oral English class and finally gave up this activity.

Regarding her memories of her university writing course, Daisy remarked that “the writing course teacher was a very strict American lady. We began our English writing with sentences, then short passages, then short compositions”. The teacher also taught them many “writing techniques” and told them to “read more and try to imitate at the beginning”. Daisy did what was suggested as she noted: “when I read something in English, and when I read some sentences or paragraphs I thought so good, I tried to remember them. When I was asked to write something, I also tried my best to use them”. As for the techniques she once learned, Daisy commented that now many of them “still remain as theory in my mind; they were not well used in practice”.

#### *Beliefs about EFL Teaching and Learning*

Daisy believes that the goals of EFL learning in China should be “to communicate with English speakers smoothly and freely as well as to have an access to the understanding of different cultures”. Her responses to the questionnaire confirm this belief as she agreed with such statements as “English can be thought of as meaningful communication”, “It is more important to focus on communication than on grammar”, as well as, “It is better to learn English in an English-speaking country”.

Daisy believes that it is best to ignore students’ oral errors, as long as what they are trying to say can be understood. Thus, it is usually more important for students to focus on what they are trying to say and not how to say it. Daisy also agreed that “Teamwork and collaborative skills are important in the learning of English”. Her own experiences of group work no doubt influenced this belief:

Group work was effective in my language learning, especially in Oral [English] class. By group work, I learned to communicate with my fellow classmates; I learned to listen to what others said, and I learned to cooperate with others. Group work made me understand that listening to and learning to listen to others, cooperating and communicating are very important in learning a language.

Moreover, Daisy believes that it would be quite helpful if the group members are at the same level with the language. On one hand, learners could communicate more freely without being afraid of losing face. On the other hand, this can ensure that learners can learn from others of the same group more efficiently.

When recounting her teaching practice, Daisy noted that she insisted on using the target language in her instruction even if students could not understand and she had to translate her words into Chinese afterwards. She believes that, in this way, her students can be provided as much input as possible in the target language. In addition, she noted:

I think the comprehensive input and output are equally effective. Through input I know how the native speakers express their ideas, how they react in certain situations, what I should pay attention to while in real world communication. When we learned English in university, cultures were not paid so much attention to, but actually at least I learn many things concerning with culture through those input, which benefits me a lot. Output is equally effective. If I just kept what I learned in my mind while never communicate with others, how could I know what I said was proper or not? To communicate with the native speakers was especially effective.

Daisy feels that her experiences learning English have affected her teaching. Sometimes, in her own teaching, she uses some methods her teachers used because she believes that those methods “were effective, at least effective to me”. She also talks to her students about her own language learning experiences because she thinks this would be helpful to them: “my teaching did benefit from my EFL learning experiences in that when

my students had the same problems as mine at the time, my experiences could offer a good reference for them, which could bring me closer to them”.

For Daisy, the culture of the target language is an important part of EFL teaching and learning. She used her own learning experience as an example and remarked that: “when we learned English in university, culture was not paid so much attention to, but through various input, I learnt many things concerning with culture of the target language which benefited me a lot”.

She argued that the teacher should teach according to the curriculum. At the same time, she believes that the curriculum has to be adapted to the different levels of the students. The following excerpt describes how Daisy thinks the content of the textbooks affect her teaching:

At first I worked as an English teacher in a high school. I began my teaching career with the first-year students of junior high...The textbook was mainly grammar-oriented at that time...We began with the present tense, then the past tense, then the present continuous tense and so on...When I began to teach, the communicative method was highly recommended. In class I tried to suppose some real situation for students to practice in. But as the textbooks mainly focused on grammar, the method did not work so well.

In relation to her university teaching experiences, she found that the levels of students also affected what she could accomplish with her teaching:

The course I taught to non-English majors [was] called College English...As the students had great difficulty in listening and speaking, we almost had no interactivities in class...Every two weeks the students would have a listening class in the audio classroom...If time permitting, I would ask them to say something on the topic of the unit [in Listening Comprehension textbooks], but most times these efforts failed because they more liked to keep silent instead of speaking...For some years, I also taught English major. While in the class to them, English is the only language...I asked them to give a three-minute presentation each time we had class. In class, sometimes we had group work, the students would be divided

into certain groups and discussed on some topics, then exchanged their discussion results. Sometimes we even had plays or mock debates. In class to English major, more methods were used. I also shared more feelings and experiences with them.

She agreed with the statement in the questionnaire that “It is important to provide clear, frequent, precise presentations of grammatical structures during language instruction”. When reflecting on her teaching to non-English majors in the context of the focus group, Daisy observed that as students have changed a lot in recent years; her teaching approaches are changing accordingly:

For these recent three or four years, I found most of the non-English students could do very well in listening and speaking. We could communicate much easier in class than before. But new problems turned up. They did not write well. They often made seemingly simple grammar mistakes in their writing. I therefore focus on how to write in class...I would also teach them some grammar rules so they could avoid making same mistakes next time.

While she recognizes the importance of grammar, Daisy is somewhat uncertain about its role in some contexts:

I also have perplexity towards EFL learning and teaching in China, especially EFL teaching. When I could communicate well with the students, I had to tolerate their bad grammar mistakes. While they could write well with little grammar mistakes, I had difficulty in communicating orally with them in English. What is the best way to balance between listening, speaking skills and grammar mastering in EFL learning? What is the best way to deal with this in EFL teaching?

Moreover, when responding to the questionnaire, Daisy also agreed with statements of “It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation”, “Problem-solving is an important part of teaching English as a foreign language” as well as “Instructional goals should be consistent with the learner’s goal”. However, these beliefs did not re-emerge either in the context of focus group or individual interviews.

### *Profile of Roy*

#### *LLEs*

Roy is 43 years old and has taught EFL in China for more than 20 years. He began to learn English in junior high school in a mountain region. At that time, students “had nothing except very simple textbook with only one sentence in each unit”. Moreover, sentences inside the textbooks were actually translations of the quotations from Chinese president Mao, Zedong’s speech. However, Roy was “deeply moved” by his teachers’ hard work and “decided to follow their examples” to be an EFL teacher.

Roy worked very hard at English in secondary schooling because his first EFL teacher “was strict with his students” and he “was afraid of his serious eyes in the class”. Discipline was emphasized and students would be punished if they “made trouble in class”. However, Roy “was quite happy with the in-class language learning experiences” during the time because the teacher “was able to make his class vivid and lively”:

In the early 80's of last century, he led students to listen in to English programs on radio, and asked us to read simplified version of English stories. In his room, I was surprised to see those thick [English] dictionaries which were rare when I was young. All that he did in class aroused my interest in and curiosity about English.

Besides learning English in the classroom, Roy read texts aloud every morning and repeatedly practiced new words, phrases and sentence patterns in the evening. When he entered senior high school, Roy “spent more hours learning English because I ...knew well English was quite important in the College Entrance Exam”. Meanwhile, “things were getting better” as he began to study in a town. Roy bought himself an English dictionary and used it to look up new words and phrases he came across during his out-

of-class learning. With the dictionary, Roy “read simplified English stories” in which he “saw a different world far away from China”. Roy described the way he learned English in those days as simple: “One reason was that I had only a little to read, to say nothing of audio to listen to or video to watch; because I was studying in a mountainous area”.

In 1982, Roy successfully passed college entrance exams and attended college, majoring in English education. He spent more hours reading in English. After class, he shared “highlights of English stories” as well as a radio with classmates. Since he was exposed to more learning materials at the time, Roy began to “emphasize the method of learning”:

I paid more attention to the text, from vocabulary to sentences. I analyzed the way the article was organized when reading it. I began to learn writing in English after I had read a good writing. Also, I often listened to programs such as VOA on radio...[I] communicated with my American teachers and corresponded with them when they returned to the States. In addition, I got news mostly from English newspapers.

Unlike most of the EFL learners in China, Roy continued to learn English after graduation from college. He began to work as an EFL teacher first at a high school and then at university. Roy described how his teaching experience affected his learning:

I often referred to dictionaries and English grammars when I was not sure about the questions [raised] by my students. I feel the experience of teaching benefited me a lot. There and then I formed a habit of learning English anywhere. I can learn something from [the English] advertisements while walking along the street; by watching NBA series, I know technical terms of basketball; and I build up my vocabulary by reading manuals of household appliances.

Roy focused on the Internet and how to apply the online resources to the teaching of English. Through this process, he “learned pc languages”, “learnt hypertext mark-up language” and would, at times, “pick up something useful there on the net”. Roy also

likes “playing English games”, “chatting with foreign friends”, and “watching English movies”. He described these experiences as “mostly positive, for such learning is easy and interesting”.

Although Roy “has been using the foreign language for more than twenty years”, he has not been to any English-speaking countries. However, he did manage to participate in some teacher education programs to improve his proficiency in the target language. Roy described his experiences in one such programs years ago:

Almost every summer, our school encourages EFL teachers to participate in programs offered by ESEC [Educational Services and Exchange with China]... Summers ago I attended the class. Teachers from U.S. and other English-speaking countries worked hard to help me with my language proficiency improvement. For instance, I had a pet phrase “Maybe I believe”, which was repeated unconsciously in my speech. My teacher pointed it out to me and now its frequency in my speech is much lower.

#### *Beliefs about EFL Teaching and Learning*

When responding to the questionnaire, Roy agreed that “English can be thought of as meaningful communication”. He expressed a similar belief later in the context of the interviews and noted that “foreign language is used to communicate in work and life”. In his point of view, the main purpose of learning a foreign language, therefore, is to “use it to do things”, to “communicate with its users and gain new, useful information”. EFL teaching, on the other hand, should focus on communication rather than on grammar. Students need to pay more attention to what they are trying to say instead of how to say it. Teachers should use English as the dominant language in instruction and devote some time to teaching students how to use specific communication strategies such as circumlocution, approximation and gestures.

Roy believes that it is better to learn English in an English-speaking country. He posits that “a lot of exposure to the target language and frequent contact with native speakers is sure to benefit learners”. Although Roy has not been to English-speaking countries, he believes that the experiences of immersion in the target language is great because “learners are exposed not only to language but [also] to the culture; and more importantly, everything there is authentic and cubic”. In the following expert, Roy further explained this belief:

[An] Indian baby was carried by a she-wolf, staying away from its parents for years. When coming back to the human world, he couldn't speak human language but only utter animal sounds. [If] A Chinese baby was born in China and grew up in an English-speaking country, he/she could speak English as well as native-speakers do. That is nothing but my theory of learning/teaching a foreign language.

Roy commented on the importance of authentic materials in EFL teaching in China:

In China, English is regarded as a foreign language so we cannot teach it in the same way as that of in English speaking countries or in the ones where the language is used as the second one. That is, Chinese students are exposed to relatively small amount of spoken and written [materials in] English and small number of native speakers. The surrounding for learning English is not so good [in China]...we [EFL teachers] have to offer students more opportunities to access authentic English by allowing them to listen to the tapes and watch more movies in class and after class. I do hope my students understand what English is [like] in real society.

Moreover, Roy believes EFL learning is also “quite different from learning other subjects” because of the importance of authentic materials in such learning. Students cannot understand the subject or use the language in real life unless teachers provide various authentic materials. They must also show students how native-speakers use the

language in real communication. Roy remarked that, “learning a language requires a lot of practice but the precondition is that everything is authentic and real which they have seen and heard before”.

Roy intends to train his students to become “active, independent and purposeful learners of the target language”. These are qualities which he believes successful language learners should have, as he explains:

Speaking of "active, independent, and purposeful", I hope my students are learning English actively rather than waiting for chances. Those who speak the language well are active. They often try their best to speak English with foreign teachers in school. Every day they listen more to English programs than they are asked to. Independent language learners can learn from their [own] mistakes. They like to try using new words, phrases and patterns. If they are told to be wrong, they will try other ways. They like to discover their own way of learning. They never wait for their teachers to explain. Most of successful language learners are interested in the language, the people who speak it and its culture. To know about them is a clear purpose. With a special purpose they gain interests, determination and confidence in themselves. More often than not they will end in success.

In addition, Roy firmly believes in the importance of learner autonomy in EFL learning. He referred to such learning as ‘self-teaching’ and “awareness of learning”. When recounting his experiences of language proficiency development in teacher education programs such as ESEC, he also noted that “adults need to learn the way of self-teaching...[because] class at schools is limited”. He stressed the value of informal learning: “In my opinion, students ought to get the method of learning in class, and after class they can get what they need. Class [learning] is limited and out-of-class [learning] is endless”. Roy added that, in the age of information when learners have easy and convenient access to various authentic materials, language learners “are sure to become successful if they have sharpened their awareness of learning”.

Roy believes it is important for the teacher to follow the prescribed curriculum, but it is even more important to set instructional goals consistent with the learner's goal. Although he did not openly articulate any drawbacks of the current EFL curriculum in China, Roy expressed his concerns about the imbalance between his students' high marks in exams and their low proficiency in the target language. He remarked that, before students attend colleges/universities, they have "developed the habit of" learning English for high scores in tests. As a result, the students "can get good scores [in exams] but can not write or read [in the target language]". Nor can the students understand others or make themselves understood. Roy believes the imbalance "results from different factors". He noted that "as a teacher, I take partial responsibility [for the imbalance]. Also, the education system and social pressure (i.e., students cannot get good jobs without CET certificate)" are some of the factors.

Roy does not think there is any connection between his own language learning experiences and his beliefs about teaching and learning EFL:

While teaching, I am willing to try a different approach. But before that, I must swallow and digest the learning method [myself]. You see, I am unwilling to perform experiments on my students...but I need some sound data before I apply the new method. I will use it only after it has proved to be perfect [on myself].

### *Summary*

This chapter presented profiles of the six teacher participants, Jeff, Laura, Vincent, Linda, Daisy and Roy. Each profile featured the participant's language learning experiences and beliefs about EFL teaching and learning. As such, this chapter considered the first two objectives of the study.

Jeff is 29 years old and began learning English in his first year of high school. He used to be a very slow learner but made huge progress with his first English teacher's help. In university, he involved himself in a lot of out-of-class English learning activities, in which participating English Corner and playing English video games were the two experiences he valued most. The language immersion experiences in an English-speaking country also gave Jeff a completely different language learning environment. Jeff believed in the importance of culture learning and a native-like pronunciation. He, however, did not believe a native-like pronunciation has any relation to one's fluency in the target language. Jeff argued that the primary purpose of language learning and teaching is to communicate and thus disfavored the EFL learning context in China. Jeff also expressed concerns about the education system as well as the EFL curriculum in China. He commented finally that how he taught was related to his own language learning experiences.

Laura is a 37 year old and when she began studying English in junior high school, there was a lack of sufficient teaching and learning resources. The situation changed when she switched to English major in university. She took courses offered by native-speaking teachers and also participated in various learning activities out-of-class such as reading, story-retelling, peer-practice, and diary writing, etc. Meanwhile, she is improving her language proficiency while presently working as a researcher in the United States. For Laura, English learning is for communication and there were five important factors she emphasized in such learning. She noted that both communicative strategies and authentic materials should be incorporated in EFL teaching. She believed that in-

class learning is the most important part of Chinese EFL learning. However, she did not think grammar-translation should be the only teaching approach.

Linda is 37 years old and began to learn English at the age of 11. Linda was a top student but always sat quietly in English class. She was forced to communicate more in the target language after becoming a teacher and thus the experiences proved to be her most valuable out-of-class language learning experience. According to Linda, teaching EFL is very different from teaching English as one's mother tongue or as a second language. However, she expressed seemingly contradictory beliefs about teaching English in a non-native speaking country. Linda believed that personality has great influence on one's oral ability in the target language. She also emphasized the importance of native-like pronunciation as well as reading in EFL learning and teaching. She expressed strong concerns about the education system as well as the EFL curriculum in China.

Vincent is 41 years old and formally turned to English as a major in high school in an effort to pass the College Entrance Examination. At the time, he had a strong interest in English grammar and spent much time out of class learning autonomously. Even after working as an EFL teacher, he was used to improving language proficiency by himself. Vincent had one-year learning experiences in an English speaking country in which he was highly motivated. Vincent believed that age is an important factor in language learning. He noted that although language learning is for communication, it is important for teacher to point out students' errors when necessary. Vincent believed that autonomous learning plays a very important role in foreign language learning. He argued

that teaching approaches vary according to the different aims of teaching. Moreover, Vincent strongly believed in Constructivism and commented in favor of Natural Approach as well as Communicative Approach.

Daisy is 37-years old and textbooks were the only learning resources she could access when she began learning English in junior high school. Nonetheless, her language learning experiences at university level were quite different. During the time, audio-visual class and oral English class impressed Daisy most. Daisy believed that the goals of EFL learning in China should be to communicate with English speakers smoothly and freely as well as to have an access to the understanding of different cultures. She argued that the teacher should teach according to the curriculum. She emphasized on the importance of teamwork as well as comprehensive and balanced input and output in language learning. She found that the levels of students also affected what she could accomplish with her teaching.

Roy is 43 years old and began to learn English in junior high school in a mountain region. He worked very hard during the time because his first EFL teacher was very strict. Roy majored in English education at university and spent more hours reading in English. Unlike most of the EFL learners in China, he continued to learn English after becoming an EFL teacher and also participated in some teacher education programs to improve his language proficiency. Roy believed that it is better to learn English in an English-speaking country and commented on the importance of authentic materials in EFL teaching in China. He believed that successful language learner should be active, independent and purposeful. In addition, he firmly believed in the importance of learner

autonomy in EFL learning. Roy noted it is important for the teacher to follow the prescribed curriculum, but it is even more important to set instructional goals consistent with the learner's goals.

Each profile reflected the participant's various LLEs gained in both formal and informal settings. The presentation of teachers' beliefs also covered all teachers' beliefs articulated in different contexts of the questionnaire, the focus group and individual interviews. Similar beliefs were grouped and synthesized while conflicting ones were highlighted as well. The purpose of the next chapter is to conduct cross-case comparisons so as to analyze and interpret the findings presented in this chapter.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Interpretation of the Findings, Conclusions and Implications

#### *Introduction*

The purpose of the chapter is to provide an interpretation of the language learning experiences (LLEs) and beliefs of the six individuals as well as the incongruencies and congruencies between these two elements. Using a grounded theory approach, the chapter presents the within-case analyses of each individual to highlight the emerging categories. The within-case analyses are organized into three sections as follows: LLEs; beliefs about EFL teaching and learning; congruencies and incongruencies. Following the within-case analyses, cross-case analyses and comparisons are presented.

The chapter presents the core category. As well, four subcategories are generated accordingly in an attempt to “build a general explanation that fits each of the individual cases even though the cases will vary in their details” (Yin, 1984, p.108). Conclusions of the study are presented in a discussion of the interrelation of the four subcategories and in relation to the study’s three research objectives. Three major findings in the study are summarized and are compared with the findings from the literature presented earlier. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications for EFL practice and research.

*Within-case Analyses**Jeff*

*LLEs.* Affective factors play an important role in Jeff's language learning. His initial LLEs are characterized by the presence of a high affective filter. The experiences highlight his fear of making mistakes, of losing face, anxiety and nervousness. He links those feelings with negative, slow and difficult progress in learning English. Jeff's subsequent and later experiences are characterized by a low affective filter. He was confident, enthusiastic, motivated, and interested. He links those feelings with positive, fast and easy progress in learning English. That progress involved winning trophies and being an "ace student". The positive experiences in university are also characterized by fervor, high levels of motivation and feeling intrigued by the language.

Jeff's out-of-class experiences in university are characterized by even greater enthusiasm. He found these experiences more interesting, versatile, and flexible. In contrast, he began to view in-class experiences as insufficient. He equates his most significant progress with the out-of-class learning experiences. He refers to how English Corner even made him "more sociable and more willing to talk to other people". His greatest progress and satisfaction in learning vocabulary comes from authentic and social activities such as playing games. In general, Jeff responds positively both affectively and cognitively to social learning experiences, especially those with native speakers.

Jeff enjoys and benefits more in a relatively loose, flexible, informal and relaxing learning environment where neither exams nor teachers' instruction are the focus or center in class. Jeff disfavors his LLEs during secondary schooling which are marked by

teacher-centered, formal and restricted classes, out-dated materials and exams as well as an emphasis on accuracy and grammar as opposed to communication. He values learner autonomy, use of authentic materials and interaction with native-speakers.

*Beliefs about EFL teaching and learning.* Jeff expresses the belief that a “right”, native-like, excellent pronunciation is very important for EFL learners in China. It helps build up the learners’ confidence, enhance their motivation, overcome the influence of their first language and thus facilitate understanding and communication. Although it does not relate to language fluency, poor pronunciation may hinder interaction and negatively affect the learner’s interest in language learning. Jeff also believes that it is difficult for Chinese learners to develop good pronunciation in China. This difficulty is due to the lack of native-speakers, accessible authentic materials as well as lack of qualified non-native speaking teachers. The difficulty results in what Jeff perceives as a low level of Chinese EFL learners’ listening comprehension and speaking skills in the target language.

Jeff believes language learning should relate to its communicative function in real-world situations. Compared to language study in formal classrooms, communicative language learning is real and authentic. He believes it corresponds with the learner’s personal needs and interests, activates the learner’s autonomy, facilitates culture understanding and improves the learner’s communicative skills in social contexts. He equates communicative language learning with more effective learning and as essential in the language learning process. This belief is also related to the belief in the importance of good pronunciation which can be gained by authentic experiences with native speakers.

However, his beliefs also indicate that communicative EFL learning in China is difficult to achieve due to the limited access to authentic materials, native-speakers or the culture of the target language. The language class is restricted, formal, non-flexible and lacking in highly qualified EFL teachers. In addition, these teachers are always the authority and at the center resulting in little attention being paid to learner differences or needs. Adding to the difficulty is what Jeff sees as an exam-oriented and unbalanced education system which emphasizes learning grammar and accuracy and neglects communication skills.

*Congruencies and incongruencies.* Jeff's early years of in-class LLEs impressed him by the initial images of his EFL teacher. His belief in the teacher's role as a helper who interacts with students and understands their different needs is congruent with his own initial LLEs under the help of his teacher. The LLEs also provided him with memories of teaching strategies. He used similar teaching strategies of awards/praise/encouragement as his teacher once used. Likewise, in his own teaching practice, he used similar communicative teaching strategies as the native-speaking teachers used in oral English class in university,

Jeff's justification for his approach to teaching is largely formulated by his personal LLEs, both those within and beyond schooling. His beliefs in the value of authenticity, a cultural component and the communicative skills in language learning are congruent with his positive out-of-class, social and communicative LLEs, especially with authentic materials and native-speakers. His special attention to pronunciation in his LLEs may also account for its importance and role in EFL learning. His emphasis on the

psychological and affective factors in language learning and teaching connects with his own LLEs which involve the struggle to build self-confidence as a language learner. Additionally, there are also congruencies between his LLEs in English Corner and his beliefs about error correction in EFL teaching/learning. He is an active and autonomous language learner and prefers less restricted, informal learning environment. The LLEs are congruent with his appreciation of learners' high motivation and autonomy in language learning and less teacher control in class teaching. The LLEs may also account for his concern about the reform of the education system in China.

However, Jeff's beliefs about the value of grammar learning and the emphasis on accuracy do not correspond with his own LLEs, most of which are characterized by learning in social and natural contexts with the purpose of developing communicative competence and fluency in the target language. Additionally, he sees in-class language learning is just as important as that gained in other ways. This is also incongruent with his preference of LLEs beyond schooling and in more social, natural, flexible environments.

### *Laura*

*LLEs.* Laura's early in-class LLEs are largely characterized by an emphasis on accuracy and grammar as opposed to communication. The experiences highlight the teacher's authority and control, and involve memorization, translation with no use of or interaction in the target language. Laura perceives these experiences as negative, unenjoyable and boring. However, most of her LLEs are marked by exposure to more

communicative and authentic learning. She benefited and made progress in class especially when she was exposed to real communicative contexts, had access to authentic materials and native-speakers. These experiences also helped her gain confidence and adapt as an English-major. Her out-of-class, communicative learning is even more versatile, collaborative, positive and enjoyable with language use in social settings and authentic contexts. She refers to how the experiences helped her improve her listening, speaking and writing skills, vocabulary learning and communicative strategies. With the progress she made in these experiences, English learning in formal settings became even more enjoyable.

*Beliefs about EFL teaching and learning.* Laura believes that in-class, formal instruction is the most important experience for Chinese EFL learners. She suggests that it serves, not only as a foundation and skeleton for language learning and progress, but also as the basis for any possible LLEs beyond schooling. She also believes in the importance and necessity of grammar learning. She therefore sees “having a good memory” and “possessing a strong ability to imitate” as two important factors in successful EFL learning.

In contrast to her beliefs in the importance of formal language learning, Laura also believes that communicative language learning is important. She appreciates language learning in real, authentic, natural, social settings with high motivation, a low affective filter, sufficient authentic materials, access to native-speakers, an integration of collaborative skills and a focus on meaningful communication. She argues that, besides

grammar instruction, teachers need to consider the learner's needs, emphasize the communicative strategies and meaningful use of the language, provide more authentic communication settings for learners' output and the ability to solve real-life problems.

Laura's beliefs indicate that the teacher's goals should be consistent with those of the student's and that it is important to adapt teaching approaches to the different levels of the students. In the case of students with a low level of proficiency, explicit and focused grammar instruction is necessary. With students of better proficiency and higher motivation, dynamic, communicative teaching approaches can be used effectively. This belief also relates to her beliefs that both grammar instruction and purposeful communication are important in EFL teaching.

*Congruencies and incongruencies.* Laura's LLEs are largely congruent with her beliefs about EFL teaching and learning in China. Her effective grammar learning in secondary school and in university connects with her beliefs that in-class learning and grammar instruction are important in EFL learning. Her struggle with high self-efficacy in university is congruent with her belief that "not being afraid of making mistakes" is an important factor in EFL learning. Her various out-of-class, social and communicative LLEs are linked to her appreciation of the focus on communication and function in language teaching and learning, especially with authentic materials and the incorporation of collaborative skills.

There are also some incongruencies between her LLEs and beliefs. Most of Laura's positive LLEs take place out-of-class and involve language experience in real, communicative, and social contexts. However, she argues that, for Chinese learners, in-

class study under the teacher's instruction is most important and grammar learning is necessary and provides the foundation for language learning.

### *Linda*

*LLEs.* Affect is an important factor in Linda's language learning and has a close relationship with her performance. She has intrinsic motivation in language learning. Her good performance in early secondary school involved being a quick learner in class and prize-winner in contests. This performance lowered her affective filter, strengthened her confidence and largely encouraged and motivated her. However, her subsequent and later experiences in university are characterized by the presence of a high affective filter with anxiety, worry, nervousness and even panic as well as an overt avoidance of the language. These negative feelings are connected with her recognition of her comparably poor and unsatisfactory performance in pronunciation and speaking tasks in oral English class. When she began teaching, Linda continued to have high anxiety and timidity when using the target language in real communication and interactions. However, her good performance helped her regain confidence. She equates the progress and performance with her most positive, enjoyable and valuable LLEs.

Linda's LLEs illustrate the influence of the teachers as well as her uncle in language learning. She links her positive LLEs in high school with the dynamic teaching and standard pronunciation of her first EFL teacher. The teacher's encouragement, help and kindness to Linda increased her motivation. Her uncle's suggestions of accessing

authentic listening and speaking materials also influenced Linda's out-of-class LLEs in university and hastened her progress.

*Beliefs about EFL teaching and learning.* Linda's beliefs suggest that language teaching and learning should emphasize meaningful communication rather than grammar. She appreciates immersion learning in real, natural settings with access to authentic culture. She favors a standard, native-like pronunciation as it facilitates understanding in real communication contexts, especially with native-speakers. She argues that mere grammar learning and an emphasis on form and error correction easily result in unenjoyable and frustrating LLEs with a loss of confidence and motivation. She refers to how language should convey meaning and allow information exchange. The teacher should emphasize communicative strategies and help build students' confidence in oral production. Various authentic materials, especially those for reading and listening, should be integrated.

Linda's beliefs indicate that EFL teaching and learning in China is very different from teaching and learning ESL or one's first language. The difference lies in a lack of "favorable environment" and lack of authentic materials and access to native-speakers. She thus believes in the necessity and importance of grammar learning, repetition and drill practice and that the grammar-translation approach can be equally important and efficient. In this regard, a prescribed teaching curriculum should be followed strictly without much flexibility and the teacher should also maintain control of instruction.

Linda believes that the education system in China needs some reform. The lack of authentic materials makes the learning of listening and speaking the “biggest obstacle” for Chinese EFL learners. The exam-oriented education system negatively influences students’ motivation, beliefs and practice and also controls the teacher’s teaching approaches as well as evaluation methods.

*Congruencies and incongruencies.* Linda’s beliefs about the importance of purposeful communication in language teaching and learning are congruent with her negative feelings towards her grammar learning experiences in secondary school. The beliefs are also congruent with her positive LLEs as an EFL teacher, during which she purposefully used the language in meaningful communication and with native-speakers. Her beliefs about the value of authentic materials are consistent with her positive LLEs with authentic materials in university. Her negative LLEs in oral English class in university, however, can account for her beliefs about the inefficiency of the classes given by native-speakers. She acknowledges that personality “has great influence on one’s oral ability in the target language”, which is linked to her LLEs as an “introvert” learner who seldom talks. Her struggle to build self-confidence as a language learner is also congruent with her appreciation of the teacher’s role as being encouraging, ignoring students’ oral errors and helping learners build confidence in oral production.

However, her beliefs about the necessity of grammar teaching and learning by repetition are incongruent with her LLEs, especially the negative grammar learning LLEs she had in secondary school. Also, there is no LLE that seems to be linked to her beliefs about the reform of the exam-oriented curriculum and education system.

*Vincent*

*LLEs.* Vincent's in-class LLEs in secondary school are characterized by strict discipline, inflexibility and little free thinking. There is a focus on grammar instruction, analysis and translation. The teacher's role is authoritative and controlling and there is little communication in or use of the target language. His formal LLEs during the time are defensive due to the avoidance and fear of making mistakes. His reaction to these experiences is that they are "extremely boring", inhibitory and negative. His subsequent in-class LLEs in university are also characterized by low motivation.

Although Vincent links negative feelings with his in-class LLEs, his out-of-class LLEs suggest that he is an analytic learner who prefers grammar learning, vocabulary study and error analysis. His autonomous LLEs in secondary school involve high and intrinsic motivation toward grammar learning. His out-of-class LLEs in university are characterized by vocabulary and drill memorization and little social communication and interaction in the target language. His LLEs after working as an EFL teacher also highlight the emphasis on accuracy involving systematic error analysis of student's written production.

*Beliefs about EFL teaching and learning.* Vincent believes in the importance of constructivist learning. He distinguishes language acquisition from language study and favors learning through the learner's personal understanding, interaction with his environment rather than through the teacher's instruction. This belief is closely linked to his beliefs in the importance and necessity of autonomy in EFL learning. This belief is also related to the importance of communicative/natural language teaching, which

involves student-centered classrooms with natural learning settings and attention to the learner's needs and goals. He refers to the importance of early access to and constant use of the language as well as the development of language awareness. He emphasizes the integration of collaborative problem-solving skills in language teaching, varied input and the avoidance of constant error correction in communication and interactions. Vincent's beliefs emphasize the influence of the curriculum in EFL teaching in China. In this regard, he indicates that the grammar-translation approach prescribed by the curriculum is effective and helps develop the learner's accuracy, the learning of structure and grammar as well as reading and writing skills.

*Congruencies and incongruencies.* Vincent is a language learner with high autonomy, which is congruent with his appreciation of the importance of autonomy in language learning. He prefers grammar learning, vocabulary study and error analysis, especially individually and out-of-class. This preference is linked to his belief that grammar learning is important in EFL teaching and learning and that it can be learned autonomously by the learner without the in-class instruction. His beliefs that language class should be learner-centered and involve a large amount of input and output as well as purposeful communication are congruent with his negative LLEs in school. These experiences are characterized by teacher-centered grammar instruction with no free thinking or interaction in the target language. Similar congruencies also lie in his LLEs and his acknowledgement of the difference between language learning and acquisition, as well as the appreciation of a communicative approach. Incongruencies between Vincent's LLEs and beliefs involve his beliefs in constructivist learning and natural approach,

which have no connection with his LLEs that are characterized largely by grammar learning and error analysis.

### *Daisy*

*LLEs.* Daisy has high, intrinsic motivation toward EFL learning. Except for her early LLEs which highlight teacher control, and focus on grammar rules and drill and practice, her LLEs are largely characterized by exposure to communicative and authentic learning settings. Her communicative learning in formal settings later in university is characterized by more access to authentic materials and culture, real communication contexts, native-speakers, and collaborative group work. Her positive reaction to these LLEs hastens her progress and improves her language proficiency. Daisy enjoys and benefits from a flexible, informal and relaxing learning environment where neither exams nor teachers' instruction are the focus. Daisy prefers her LLEs in-class over some social learning experiences in out-of-class settings such as English Corner. She values group work, use of authentic materials, cultural understanding and interaction with native-speakers.

*Beliefs about EFL teaching and learning.* Daisy emphasizes real, purposeful communication in natural, social, authentic settings. She also highlights the significance of sufficient authentic materials, access to native-speakers, and equal emphasis on input and output of the target language. As well, she believes in the importance of a culture component and appreciates the value and efficiency of collaborative skills and teamwork in language learning.

Daisy's beliefs suggest that the curriculum influences the contents of the textbooks and the choice of teaching approaches. Additionally, students' levels also greatly affect the efficiency of teachers' teaching approaches and strategies. She argues that, with students of low proficiency, a communicative approach is not effective and thus a focus on linguistic rules is necessary. With students of higher proficiency, dynamic teaching strategies can be used effectively and enjoyably with an emphasis on the communicative function of the language. This belief also relates to her beliefs in the roles of accuracy and fluency. She believes that, with students of high proficiency in oral communication but low accuracy in writing tasks, grammar instruction should be incorporated into teaching.

*Congruencies and incongruencies.* Daisy's beliefs about EFL teaching and learning are congruent with her personal LLEs. She enjoyed memorization, drills, practice and grammar learning in secondary schooling. These experiences connect with her beliefs that grammar instruction and attention to accuracy are necessary in EFL teaching. Her positive LLEs in university with opportunities for oral production, access to authentic materials, native-speakers and to the culture of the target language are consistent with her beliefs in the role of communication and a cultural component in language teaching. Her beliefs about the value and nature of teamwork and collaborative skills also correspond with her enjoyable LLEs in oral English class in university.

*Roy*

*LLEs.* Roy's LLEs are characterized by intrinsic and continuous motivation in spite of the difficulty he experienced with little access to authentic materials during the early years of his EFL learning. His motivation is also closely linked to his autonomy in language learning. On his own, he accesses authentic learning resources and materials such as dictionary, radios, computer and the Internet, English games, newspapers, sport shows and advertisements. He learns effectively individually and autonomously with clear goals.

Roy is a highly motivated and autonomous learner who seeks opportunities for varied, authentic experiences and resources. As a result, his LLEs are largely communicative and do not involve simply grammar learning and memorization. His initial LLEs are characterized by a vivid and dynamic teaching approach used by his first EFL teacher with the incorporation of authentic materials and the encouragement of purposeful use of the language. His subsequent LLEs in university highlight exposure to more authentic learning resources such as radio programs and newspapers, frequent contact and real communication with native-speakers as well as collaborative learning with classmates. His continuous LLEs as an EFL teacher are mostly in informal and natural settings with high autonomy and access to various learning recourses and authentic materials. His reactions to these LLEs are positive and these reactions hasten his language development and progress.

*Beliefs about EFL teaching and learning.* Roy's beliefs indicate that the focus on the communicative function of the language is important in language learning and

teaching. He favors experiential and immersion learning in real, natural, social, informal settings with exposure to authentic materials, culture and native-speakers. While recognizing the lack of a supportive environment in EFL settings, he highlights the importance of authentic materials, learners' needs and communicative strategies in language teaching. In contrast to grammar learning and the emphasis on accuracy and error correction, he focuses on purposeful and meaningful communication in real-world situations to convey and exchange information.

Roy believes in the importance of learner autonomy in language learning. This belief is linked to his belief that in-class learning is limited but out-of-class learning is endless. A successful language learner, therefore, is "active, independent and purposeful" with a "sharpened" "awareness of learning" and high motivation and autonomy, high independence, critical reflection, self-analysis and clear goals.

Roy's beliefs suggest that EFL learning in China is difficult. The difficulty lies in its lack of supportive environment and lack of access to authentic materials and native-speakers. The learner cannot experience the language in real contexts and purposeful communication. Added to the difficulty is the learner's lack of motivation, which is due to the unbalanced teaching curriculum, exam-oriented education system as well as social pressure.

*Congruencies and incongruencies.* Roy's LLEs are congruent with his beliefs about EFL teaching and learning. He focuses on purposeful and meaningful communication in real-world situations to convey and exchange information. This belief connects with his positive LLEs in informal, social settings with various authentic

materials and native-speakers. He stresses the importance of authentic materials in language learning and teaching. This importance corresponds with his high motivation for and positive experiences with learning resources and authentic materials in his LLEs. He is a language learner with high motivation and autonomy. His LLEs are congruent with his beliefs that learner autonomy and the “awareness of learning” are very important in language learning, and that successful learners should have such qualities as “active”, “independent” and “purposeful”.

#### *Cross-case Analysis*

The core category that emerged from the analysis is that of tension in teachers’ LLEs, their beliefs and the connections between the two constructs. Four subcategories define this core category. These four subcategories are as follows: 1) high motivation and learner autonomy versus low confidence; 2) language experience versus lack of access to authentic materials and native-speakers; 3) communication and meaning versus grammar and accuracy; 4) personal versus national goals. The next sections of this chapter will discuss these subcategories in detail.

#### *High Motivation and Learner Autonomy versus Low Confidence*

The Affective Filter hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1982) “captures the relationship between affective variables and the process of second language acquisition by positing that acquirers vary with respect to the strength or level of their affective filters” (p. 31). According to Krashen, affect includes factors such as motivation, self-

confidence and anxiety. Learners with high motivation, self-confidence or low anxiety generally have a lower filter and tend to do better in second language acquisition.

What is salient in the teachers' profiles of their LLEs is that they have high, "intrinsic" (Ellis, 1997) motivation in learning the target language. They autonomously seek out and acquire varied experiences in which they either learn the language by individual analysis of its linguistic forms or acquire the language through real contact with authentic materials, native speakers in real, social, communicative contexts. This motivation would normally suggest a low affective filter. However, although the teachers have high motivation, they share low confidence in their language proficiency. They refer to their high anxiety, and fear of making mistakes and losing face. For example, although highly motivated, both Laura and Linda, indicate their experiences of being silent in university due to their low confidence in their ability to speak in the target language.

#### *Language Experience versus Lack of Access to Authentic Materials and Native-speakers*

Krashen (1982) proposes a difference between the acquiring and learning of a second language. Language acquisition is a natural and subconscious process "similar, if not identical, to the way children develop ability in their first language" (p. 10). This position therefore highlights the importance of real, authentic contexts for language acquisition in which there is sufficient exposure to native speakers and access to various authentic materials.

All six teachers expressed a belief in the importance of acquiring the language in real, natural and authentic contexts. However, their experiences were largely characterized by a lack of access to either sufficient authentic materials or native

speakers. The teachers referred to their lack of sufficient authentic materials or even learning resources, especially prior to their LLEs in university. Their LLEs before entering university are all marked by lack of access to native-speakers. The teachers referred to their frustration and struggle with seeking real contact with the language through radio and TV programs or even short stories from English dictionaries. All six teachers described the changes in their LLEs in university which are due to the initial access to authentic materials and native-speakers. They value their out-of-class LLEs with sufficient learning resources and communication with native-speakers and see them as a partial key to their success. However, this kind of experience is difficult to achieve. As an example, Jeff's LLEs in English Corner are characterized by a lack of native speakers.

Authenticity can increase learners' motivation by exposing them to the 'real' language (Guariento & Morley, 2001), provide authentic cultural information, relate more closely to learners' needs, and support a more creative approach to teaching (Richards, 2001). All the teachers emphasized the value and importance of access to authentic materials and native speakers in language learning and teaching. However, they also clearly indicated the struggle to provide such authenticity for their students, which therefore results in difficulty in teaching and learning EFL in China.

#### *Communication and Meaning versus Grammar and Accuracy*

The tension between a focus on linguistic forms and a focus on communication has been faced by language teachers for years (Doughty, 1998). This tension is reflected in all six EFL teachers' beliefs as well as in their experiences as language learners. Their

in-class LLEs, especially in secondary schooling, are characterized by explicit instruction with an emphasis on grammatical rules and accuracy. Although some of the teachers, such as Linda and Vincent, reacted negatively to this type of instruction, all the teachers agreed on the advantage of explicit grammar teaching in improving accuracy. All the teachers aimed to have varied out-of-class LLEs in which they could use and produce the language with real social interactions and communication. At the same time, however, they also emphasized linguistic accuracy. Jeff and Daisy, for example, indicate the disadvantage of the lack of error correction in English Corner.

The teachers face a similar tension in their beliefs about EFL teaching and learning in China. Overtly, their beliefs reflect aspects of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). They appreciate acquisition in real contexts, privilege learners' needs and cultural components, value the importance of sufficient authentic materials and access to native-speakers, and highlight the significance of meaningful and purposeful communication and collaboration. They see error correction as necessary only when it does not interrupt natural communication or in learners' written production. This belief is also correspondent with a theoretical understanding of the role of error correction in language acquisition (e.g., Henrickson, 1978; Krashen, 1982, Terrell, 1977). However, the teachers believe in the efficiency of the grammatical-translation approach in EFL teaching in China. Jeff, for example, believes in the value of explicit analysis and comparison of synonyms and related words in the target language. At the same time, he believes that vocabulary should be learned in authentic contexts along with understanding

of the culture. Daisy, in the context of the group interviews, also clearly illustrates her perplexity and uncertainty about the role of grammar in language instruction.

### *Personal versus National Goals*

Emerging from the teachers' LLEs and beliefs is a tension between their personal goals for teaching and learning EFL and the goals for teaching and learning EFL as prescribed by the education system in China. The portrait of teaching and learning EFL in the Chinese education system that emerges from the six profiles is one that is frequently unsupportive of learners' goals. This system is characterized by a lack of authentic materials, limited access to native-speakers, restrictive, formal instruction dominated by teacher authority and control, as well as an emphasis on exams to evaluate learners' proficiency. The six teachers believe in the importance of acquiring the language in comparatively free settings in which the learners' central role, autonomy and individual needs are privileged. However, they realize that such learning is not easy to achieve in China. As a result, teachers feel frustrated, take "defensive learning" and expose themselves to more out-of-class learning.

The Chinese system's focus on exams, such as the requirement of the college entrance examination as well as Band 4 and Band 6 exams in university, conflicts with the teachers' goals of acquiring the language in real contexts for real communicative purposes. The exams' focus on accuracy, vocabulary learning and rote memorization deemphasizes the learners' interests in speaking and listening. As EFL teachers, they struggle with their communicative-oriented individual goals of language teaching versus the restrictive evaluation method which focuses on the examination of accuracy and

linguistic forms. Jeff, Linda, Vincent as well as Roy argue that education reform is urgent in EFL teaching and learning in China, without which no acquisition of the target language can be achieved.

### *Conclusions*

The purpose of this study was to explore and gain insight into the personal language learning experiences and beliefs of EFL teachers' in China. Its objectives were to: 1) identify and describe the LLEs of a group of NNS EFL teachers in China; 2) identify and describe the beliefs of the group of NNS EFL teachers about teaching and learning the target language; and 3) identify and describe the congruencies and incongruencies between the group of NNS EFL teachers' personal LLEs and their beliefs. The following paragraphs summarize the findings in relation to the objectives.

All of the six participant teachers in this study demonstrated high motivation in learning EFL. As a result, they share high learner autonomy and strive to acquire the language in various out-of-class LLEs, either individually or in social contexts. The teachers' LLEs are continuous and are characterized by the desire and eagerness to have more real contact with the language for communicative purposes, in comparatively free settings and with access to sufficient authentic materials and native-speakers. However, these personal goals of language learning are not easy to achieve.

The teachers' LLEs demonstrate their struggle with the tensions caused by the Chinese education system which emphasizes grammar and accuracy in the formal in-class teaching and evaluation with the teacher's dominating role as authority and control.

Additionally, the lack of access to authentic materials and native speakers adds to the tensions and, to some extent, leads to the teachers' unconscious focus on grammar and accuracy in their personal LLEs. The teachers had high motivation. However, they struggled with the focus on accuracy in the EFL curriculum as well as the lack of authentic materials and native speakers. They strove for language learning for meaningful communication. Their LLEs are characterized by the presence of a high affective filter especially when faced with oral production and real communication.

The six teachers in the study articulate their beliefs about the nature of language, about language learning and teaching, and about the role of the teacher and the EFL curriculum in China. What is common in these beliefs is the teachers' preference for language teaching and learning for communicative purposes. Related to this belief are their understandings about the importance of sufficient authentic materials, the value of cooperative and communicative skills, the significance of arousing and maintaining the learner's motivation, and the appreciation of the learner's central role and autonomy. However, accompanying the beliefs are the teachers' uncertainties about the role of grammar and accuracy in instruction. The teachers presented conflicts with their roles in the context of exam-oriented Chinese education system. Moreover, the teachers struggled with developing learners' communicative competence in the absence of a supportive teaching and learning context.

The within-case analysis identified the congruencies and incongruencies between each of the teacher's personal LLEs and beliefs. The common congruencies across the six cases include:

1) the teachers are language learners with high learner autonomy, which is congruent with their beliefs about the value of learner autonomy in language learning;

2) the teachers struggle in their LLEs with the tension between their high motivation and low self-confidence, which is congruent with their beliefs about the teacher's role in motivating learners and lowering their affective filters;

3) the teachers' LLEs are characterized by a preference for LLEs in comparatively open learning environments over those in restrictive formal settings dominated by teachers' authority and control. This is congruent with the tensions caused by the Chinese education system as well as their beliefs about student-centered instruction and EFL curriculum;

4) the teachers' LLEs indicate their desire to acquire the language for communicative purposes with authentic materials or/and access to native speakers, which is congruent with the teachers' beliefs about the focus on communication and meaning as well as the value of authenticity in language teaching;

5) the teachers' LLEs are characterized by a tension between the focus on communication and meaning and the focus on grammar and accuracy, which is congruent with their perplexity and conflicts with the proper role of grammar in language teaching.

The incongruencies between the six teachers' LLEs and beliefs are largely related to the teachers' tensions between their personal goals and the national goals, their desire to acquire the language with a focus on communication and the focus on accuracy caused by the lack of access to authenticity and mandates of the Chinese education system. These incongruencies thus involve:

1) the teachers' preference for out-of-class LLEs without the teacher's control, which is incongruent with their beliefs about the importance of in-class instruction in EFL teaching;

2) the teachers' disfavoring of the grammar-translation approach applied in their in-class LLEs, which is incongruent with their beliefs that this approach is of equivalent value to the communicative approach in EFL teaching in China;

3) the teacher's high motivation and learner autonomy in their LLEs, which is incongruent with their beliefs that learning and teaching EFL in China is difficult.

These findings can be summarized into three major findings in the study and can be compared with the findings from the literature presented in Chapter 3. First, the six EFL teachers had continuous LLEs from the first day they accessed the language. These LLEs are comprised of both in-class and various, positive out-of-class LLEs. This finding supports Graney's (2000) understandings that language teachers' language experiences can be examined as a continuum. This finding also corresponds with Johnson's (1999) position that, besides the apprenticeship of observation, teachers have informal LLEs which can "leave powerful imprints on teachers" (p.34). As few empirical studies have explored language teachers' LLEs acquired beyond schooling, this study contributes to the literature by filling this gap and presenting a comprehensive picture of the participant teachers' LLEs.

Second, the six EFL teachers' beliefs reveal their tension between the communicative and the grammar-translation approach. The finding is supportive of recent literature (e.g., Yuan, 2004) regarding Chinese EFL teachers' beliefs about the

communicative language teaching approach. In her study, Yuan suggests that Chinese EFL teachers have inappropriate understandings of the approach and there is a need to adapt this approach to the Chinese context. However, a contribution of the present study lies in its effort to understand teachers' beliefs in relation to an examination of their personal learning experiences of the target language.

Third, the six EFL teachers' beliefs have a close relationship with their personal LLEs, both those gained in and out of class. This finding is congruent with Johnson's (1994) who concludes that both formal and informal LLEs "left lasting images" for teachers and "had a powerful impact on their beliefs about second language teachers and teaching" (p.444). Johnson posits that the coexistence of teachers' formal and informal LLEs can create conflicting beliefs because the teachers lack "clear images of how to create these sorts of experiences in an actual classroom" (p.449). This conclusion, however, cannot be validated by this study. The findings of the present study are that tensions and conflicts exist in both the participant teachers' LLEs and beliefs. These tensions result from social-cultural factors in the teaching and learning contexts in China.

Additionally, no data in the present study are directly supportive of some researchers' (e.g., Borg, 2004; Harrington & Hertel, 2000, Kennedy, 1990; Lortie, 1875) view that teachers' apprenticeship of observation is largely responsible for their preconceptions about teaching. The result of this study demonstrates the congruencies between the participant teachers' beliefs and their LLEs beyond schooling. Also, the finding of the study is congruent with Bailey et al.'s (1996) suggestion that the "teacher factor" is a main factor that influences teachers' affects as language learners. Moreover,

Brown and McGannon (1998), in their study, conclude that experienced teachers, unlike novices, seldom draw on their own experiences as language learners. The result is therefore incongruent with the present study as most of the participants are in-service, experienced EFL teachers who indicate a close relationship between their beliefs and personal LLEs.

### *Implications of the Study*

The teachers in this study demonstrated high learner autonomy in language learning. The teacher as well as the curriculum can therefore address and highlight the cultivation of learners' autonomy and the learner's central role in language teaching. The study suggested teachers' tensions in their personal LLEs and beliefs resulted from the lack of access to sufficient authentic materials and native-speakers. Computer-supported language learning therefore may be integrated into EFL teaching practice to reconcile these tensions. The findings of this study confirm other studies which suggest that teacher's beliefs are closely related to their personal LLEs. Thus, opportunities may be provided to teachers in teacher education or professional development for critical reflection and self-examination. Additionally, the openness to the more advanced education theories in western countries may reconcile the tensions caused by the restrictive, exam-oriented education system in China.

The main purpose of the study was to explore and gain insight into the LLEs and beliefs of EFL teachers' in China. Because these participant teachers came from the particular social-cultural background in China, it is impossible to attribute the findings to

ESL contexts. Further research therefore, can inquire into cases of ESL teachers' beliefs and experiences to compare to the findings of this study. Research can also differentiate between teachers at different levels of elementary and high school, as well as between novice/pre-service teachers and in-service/experienced teachers.

The teachers in this study presented high learner autonomy in language learning. More research can be focused on this notion to explore its relationship to effective and successful language learning. As the study indicated a close relationship with one's personal learning experiences and beliefs, research into the beliefs of the students may also provide information to assist and support of teachers in the social negotiation of their beliefs.

## Appendix A: Email to Request Participation

Dear teacher,

The purpose of this email is to invite you to participate in a study. The purpose of the study is to understand and identify from your perspective the relationship between your language learning experiences and your beliefs about teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL). It is hoped that this research help improve EFL teachers' professional growth and teaching practice through developing a better understanding of teachers' underlying beliefs and personal experiences. Participation in this study will hopefully benefit teachers by providing them with an opportunity to articulate their own implicit beliefs about teaching and learning as well as to collaboratively interact with colleagues in the understanding of problems related to their professional practice.

As part of this study, you will be invited to participate in the following activities:

### Activity 1:

- Completion of an online, asynchronous questionnaire.
- Approximately 30 minutes over a period of two weeks.
- Examples of questions:
  - a) Years of experiences of learning English as a foreign language (EFL):  
    \_\_a. 6-10 years \_\_b. 10-15 years \_\_c. 15-20 years \_\_d. more than 20 years
  - b) Give a very brief description of any informal learning experiences of English as a foreign language.

### Activity 2:

- Asynchronous focus group discussion with other EFL teachers in WebCT™  
 Approximately 8 hours over a period of two months
- Topics may include:
  - a) How do you define effective EFL teaching in China?
  - b) Do you consider yourself a successful EFL learner? Why or why not?

### Activity 3:

- Participation in an email-based asynchronous interview within WebCT™.
- Approximately 60 minutes in conjunction with the focus group
- Interview questions may include:  
 Do you think vocabulary is important in EFL teaching and learning? How do you think it can be best learned or/and taught?

### Activity 4:

- Online member check within WebCT™.
- Approximately 30 minutes over a period of one week

- This will allow participants edit/clarify any of their comments.

Participant anonymity will be ensured in a special shell of WebCT™, which is dedicated solely to the collection of data for this thesis. Only the researcher and the research supervisor will have access to this shell. All material that results from WebCT™ will only be viewed by the researcher and will be destroyed after a period of five years.

The Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research of Memorial University has approved the proposal for this research. If you have read the information in this letter and are willing to participate in this study, please read the attached consent form. If you agree to participate, please indicate your consent by returning the consent form via email with your typed-in name and date. Once you confirm your consent, the researcher will contact you with information on how to proceed to the next stage of the study.

If you have any further questions about this study or your possible involvement in it, you may contact one or all of the following individuals:

- Principal investigator, Zhen Zeng: 01 (416) 650-4459, or by email: [zz\\_helen2002@yahoo.com](mailto:zz_helen2002@yahoo.com)
- Thesis supervisor, Elizabeth Murphy: 01 (709) 737-7634, or by email: [emurphy@mun.ca](mailto:emurphy@mun.ca)
- (for questions regarding ethics only) Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR): 01 (709) 737-8368, or by email: [icehr@mun.ca](mailto:icehr@mun.ca)

## Appendix B: Consent form

I understand that:

1. My participation in this study will involve the following activities,
  - Completing a questionnaire in WebCT™. (Approximately 30 minutes).
  - Contributing to a focus group in WebCT™ along with a group of other EFL teachers. (Approximately 8 hours over a period of two months).
  - Participating in an email-based interview in WebCT™. (Approximately 60 minutes in conjunction with the discussion).
2. By agreeing to participate in this project, I am providing consent to publication of my comments in an anonymous format in part or whole in subsequent research reports and papers that may be published in relation to this study. These comments may include any contribution I make at any point in the research including any contribution to the discussion forum and in the questionnaire and interview.
3. The confidentiality of comments in the discussion forum cannot be fully guaranteed because of the small number of participants. However, no participants will be named in the final report. In no case will responses from individual participants be identified. All responses will be grouped together and published in aggregate form only.
4. The principal investigator, Zhen Zeng, will provide me for final approval a transcript of any references to any of my comments and contributions made in the questionnaire, the discussion forum, or interviews. I will have the opportunity to edit these comments or to request changes prior to publication.
5. If I agree to participate in this project, and upon my request, I will be provided with the conclusions of the research and access to the final research report once all findings have been compiled.
6. Should I decide to participate, my participation is voluntary. Refusal to take part in the study involves no penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.
7. I can choose to withdraw from this project at any time. If I withdraw from the study, all data collected in relation to me will be destroyed immediately.
8. I can choose to not respond to any questions in the study.
9. The researcher, Zhen Zeng, will be available during the study to answer any questions I might have.

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Participant's name

---

Date

## Appendix C: Online Questionnaire

### LLE and Beliefs

Number of questions: 11

#### Question 1

Your Name, E-mail Address, Age and Gender respectively:

#### Question 2

Number of years of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in China:

#### Question 3

Types of EFL learning experiences (check any of the following that apply to your experiences):

- a. Formal language learning experiences
- b. Informal language learning experiences (mainly characterized by an absence of formal assessment of any kind)
- c. Language immersion in English-speaking countries
- d. Language proficiency development in teacher education
- e. Others

#### Question 4

Describe your formal EFL learning experiences. Were these experiences positive or negative? Why?

#### Question 5

Describe your informal EFL learning experiences. Were these experiences positive or negative? Why?

#### Question 6

Describe any experiences of language immersion in an English-speaking country. How did these experiences help/not help your language learning and/or teaching?

#### Question 7

If applicable, describe any experiences of language proficiency improvement in teacher education.

How did these experiences help/not help your language learning and/or teaching?

**Question 8**

If applicable, describe your EFL learning experiences other than those mentioned above:

**Question 9**

Check any of those that correspond to your beliefs.

- 1. It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.
- 2. English can be thought of as meaningful communication.
- 3. If students understand some of the basic grammatical rules of the language they can usually create lots of new sentences on their own.
- 4. It is important for the teacher to follow the prescribed curriculum.
- 5. Usually it is more important for students to focus on what they are trying to say and not how to say it.
- 6. It is better to learn English in an English-speaking country.
- 7. Language can be described as a set of behaviours which are mastered through lots of drill and practice with the language patterns of native speakers.
- 8. In general, students work best and learn the most when they work individually.
- 9. In effective foreign language instruction, some time is devoted to teaching students how to use specific communication strategies (e.g., circumlocution, approximation, gestures).
- 10. When students make oral errors, it is best to ignore them, as long as you can understand what they are trying to say.
- 11. The role of cultural instruction in effective foreign language programs is secondary to that of vocabulary and grammar.
- 12. Effective language instruction incorporates authentic materials.
- 13. English can be thought of as a set of grammatical structures which are learned consciously and controlled by the language learner.
- 14. English is the dominant language instruction in effective foreign language programs.
- 15. Instructional goals should be consistent with the learner's goal.
- 16. Learning English as a foreign language in China is mostly a matter of learning grammar rules.
- 17. Problem-solving is an important part of teaching English as a foreign language.

- 18. It is more important to focus on communication than on grammar.
- 19. The teacher needs to break down the language into sizable parts that the students can grasp bit by bit.
- 20. English is learned subconsciously in non-academic, social situations.
- 21. In effective foreign language programs, nearly all of the class time is devoted to learning the language system (i.e., pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and syntax).
- 22. Learning English as a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning vocabulary.
- 23. It is best to correct the oral errors made by students immediately, or it will be hard to get rid of them later on.
- 24. Teamwork and collaborative skills are important in the learning of English.
- 25. It is important to provide clear, frequent, precise presentations of grammatical structures during language instruction.
- 26. The primary focus of effective foreign language programs is on the development of vocabulary and knowledge of grammar.

**Question 10**

Please select 5 statements in the above question that best reflect your personal beliefs about language learning and teaching:

**Question 11**

If applicable, provide some reasons why you selected the 5 statements:

**Appendix D: Focus Group Welcome Message****Subject: Welcome**

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**Message no. 5****Author:** Zhen Zeng (mun\_ed\_experiences)**Date:** Monday, September 26, 2005 3:56pm

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Dear teachers,

Welcome to the focus group!

The purpose of this discussion is to provide you with the opportunity to reflect on your personal EFL learning experiences and beliefs about teaching and learning English in China. I encourage you to partake openly and actively in the discussion! I am honored to have such an opportunity to learn about your experiences and beliefs.

Helen :)

**Appendix E: Introduction Template****Subject: Introduction**

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**Message no. 6****Author:** Zhen Zeng (mun\_ed\_experiences)**Date:** Monday, September 26, 2005 3:59pm

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You are invited to begin our discussion by introducing yourself and telling everyone where you are currently employed. I will begin but please feel free to present yourself in whatever way you like.

My name is Zhen Zeng. Currently, I am living in the modern big city of Toronto, Canada and am trying my best to finish my master's thesis. I spend each day doing a lot of writing and reading. The work is tiring but interesting.

Normally, I work at home on my own computer but sometimes I go to the library to conduct literature reviews. Life here is simple, sometimes even boring. Homesickness is a problem I have to cope with almost everyday. Sending and receiving emails from you are the first things to do when I get up everyday. It's so exciting to hear from you from far across the ocean!

I look forward to sharing experiences and beliefs with you.

Many thanks! Helen :)

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