

My experience of learning languages and teaching English in China – A narrative inquiry

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ABSTRACT: This article is a narrative of a teacher's personal experience in learning languages in her childhood and thereafter her professional journey as a university English teacher in China. The author's rich language experience as a child foreshadows the problems her students encountered in language learning, namely, interest and inspiration. However, confined by her limitations as a product of the traditional teaching, she initially forsook her own language learning strategies. Therefore, she struggled to adapt to the transition from the traditional, teacher-centred, grammar-translation teaching methodology to student-centred Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The conflicts in her teaching seem inevitable and her dilemma is quite common. The teacher thus reflects on how she learned languages and finds her experience as a child benefits her understanding about CLT.

KEYWORDS: Narrative inquiry, additional language acquisition, early childhood language learning experience, university English teaching, Communicative Language Teaching, China.

INTRODUCTION

The ten years of my teaching career in Central China Agricultural University, from 1992 to 2003, can be divided into two distinct parts. The divide occurred with the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT hereafter) in 1999. From 1992 to 1999, I had taught in the traditional teacher-centred grammar-translation way, using the textbook, *College English* (Zai, 1986), published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press in 1986. From 1999 to 2003, I changed to another textbook, *New College English* (Ying, 1999), published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in 1999, adopting the student-centred, subject-based teaching pattern of CLT. My adaptation to CLT was both a challenge and an opportunity for me. In this adaptation process, my experiences in learning languages played a crucial role.

This paper takes the form of an autobiographical narrative inquiry. The data for the study comes from my autobiography, in which I explore my language experiences which occurred at the interface between Mandarin and the other Chinese dialects I acquired, and also at the interface between Chinese and English. My work experience as an English teacher in a key agricultural university in China is also explored. The study investigates the complexities of language acquisition. By reconstructing these experiences I attempt to develop a perspective on my work as a teacher and also on current educational policy in China.

Using this autobiographical narrative or “self-study” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001), I have analysed my footsteps in language learning. I recall my childhood experience in

learning languages: how I was immersed in various Chinese dialects, my life in Beijing as my father's companion, the readings of translated picture books, my first close encounter with a foreigner, my doubt about the efficiency of formal English learning from an early age and the two parallel tracks of my English learning. I also narrate my professional journey as a university English teacher: my work experience before CLT, the opportunity brought by CLT and my adaptation to CLT.

IMMERSED IN VARIOUS CHINESE DIALECTS

As about 90 percent of Chinese population lives in the countryside, it is not surprising that both of my parents came from little mountainous villages. However, in the course of their pursuit of studies, they gradually moved away from their hometowns. Finally they worked in two different cities, my father in the north, the capital of China, Beijing City, my mother in the south, a city in a seaside province. Still, they kept strong bonds with their extended families and visited them as often as they could. So I was a born traveller, from city to city and from city to the countryside.

China is a vast country where a great diversity of dialects coexists alongside the national language, Mandarin. This is the rich linguistic world into which I was born. Although Chinese has only one unified written form, the variety of spoken languages or dialects is striking. A dialect might sound like a foreign language to people from another place and they might not understand a word of it. Besides pronunciation, the choice of words in dialects might also be different. For example, when a Wuhanese says “*haizi*”, meaning “*shoes*”, a Beijinger interprets it as “*children*”, because though they are of the same pronunciation, the meanings are different. Because my parents came from different villages of different regions, they spoke different dialects. My grandparents were common villagers, and so they could not speak Mandarin. Therefore as young as I was, as their grandchild I had to speak the dialects of my maternal and paternal grandparents, as well as the dialect of the city in which my mother worked and Beijing dialect, that is, Mandarin. Later our whole family moved to Wuhan City, and I had to pick up the dialect Wuhanese, too. I had to speak different dialects according to whom I met and what situation it was. I felt I was an operator on a switchboard and I was a prolific language learner.

From the very beginning of my life, language learning has been an indispensable part of my daily life. I was like a mediator or a bridge. I knew both cities and the countryside very well. A born traveller and linguist, I was always on a train travelling from city to city or from city to the countryside and vice versa. I had to speak five dialects in order to negotiate the social relationships around me. As the second generation urban dweller of my extended family, I still had close links with rural areas. My place continually changed, making me compare and think a lot about the variety of the languages I encountered. My experience of the diversity of spoken languages in China meant that this diversity had become the norm for me, not one standard language. This knowledge paved the way for me to accept foreign languages as also being “*natural*”, instead of something alien and bizarre, which boosted my readiness to learn English.

MY LIFE IN BEIJING AS MY FATHER'S COMPANION AND THE READINGS OF TRANSLATED PICTURE BOOKS

My father is the person who has exerted the greatest influence on me. As I have mentioned earlier, he was born in a little mountainous village, a son of typical, semiliterate Chinese peasants. He could not speak standard Mandarin until he went to university. Yet he fought his way and managed to go to Beijing University, the most prestigious university of China. Due to his success as a university student, he was able to stay in Beijing after graduation and work as a researcher in the Academy of Social Sciences of China, a leading research organization in China. He was an archaeologist and that was why he was good at photography, which added a lot of romantic flavours to my childhood. So, although my father was the son of peasants, as his daughter, I was born into a world of books, a highly intellectual world that was quite different from the one he knew as a child.

I always regard my childhood as the happiest time in my life, perfect in my eyes. Although my parents lived in two different cities, travelling and holidaying together only gave life excitement, and it was hardly an inconvenience to me. However, it was not perfect from my father's point of view, and he longed to transfer my mother from the provincial city to the capital in order to have a normal family life.

I was born in the South and stayed there in my infancy, but later – my memory tells me that it was only just after I had started to walk – my father moved me to live with him in the North because he felt lonely. He chose to take care of me all by himself, or, to be more exact, to keep me as his companion in the Academy of Social Sciences of China. This meant that during this phase of my life, I was surrounded by traditional Chinese architecture and horticulture. When my father went to work, I had to be sufficiently independent to enjoy myself in his work unit, playing with little kids if there were any. My father often told me that he felt so funny on my first day in Beijing, because when he returned from work he found me using southern dialect to converse with Mandarin-speaking friends and playing so amicably with them. When there were no other children around, I wandered around quietly outside the office buildings and library, casting casual glances through the windows at the researchers busy at work, appreciating the national flower peonies and various other flowers in the garden whenever they were blossoming, and climbing up the artificial hill to look into the distance. I seldom had playmates during the day because most of them went to school, so I spent most of my time reading books, pondering and dreaming.

My father learned Russian both in middle school and at university, and he also used Russian as a tool language in his research. Although he picked up English after 1980, he maintains a lifetime fondness of Russian. Sometimes he spoke Russian to me and tried to teach me some simple Russian. He would say a Russian word and I would ponder the sound and meaning of this strange word. He introduced many translated picture books to me.

Translated literature played an important role in my life. I was greatly influenced by the picture books with Chinese text. The Russian writer Maxim Gorky's trilogy, *My childhood*, *In the world* and *My university* depicted his life as an orphan boy, struck by poverty, yet persisting in self-study and wishing to enter university. The themes of longing and loneliness appealed to me so much. When his university dream was

finally shattered and he ended up being a peddler on the campus before leaving to seek a new way out, his resilience resonated with me. I flipped through these three picture books a lot, and became familiar with the concept of independent study and university in my preschool years.

Later, this desire was reinforced by another Chinese text picture book, *Madame Curie*, which probed into a daring Polish girl's struggle in the colonized Poland under the rule of the Russian Tsar; how she lost her much beloved mother at a tender age; how she was refused admission to Polish universities; how she studied French diligently and succeeded in pursuing her study in France, a much more democratic country; and how she fought for women's equal rights in a male-dominated society full of gender discrimination. I was happy that she was triumphant and twice became a Nobel Prize winner. It was not until many years later that I fully understood the patriarchy and the experience of studying overseas described in this book.

Reading translated works other than works written by Chinese authors, I became aware of foreign language learning from the picture book *Madam Curie*, in which a Polish girl learned French. My situation seemed to make me identify with the heroes and heroines in the books, and I wished that one day I would be like them or experience the life they lived. This kind of free reading of translated books benefited my consequent foreign language learning because the characters in these stories had become my role models and the wish of living a similar life stimulated me to learn a foreign language well.

Poverty and scarcity were what I was most familiar with in my childhood. There was a rigid ration system, in which people bought daily necessities by using coupons, such as rice coupons, cloth coupons, oil coupons, meat coupons and so on. My living conditions were a mismatch with my father's celebrated work unit of the Academy of Social Sciences of China, but considering the fact that most Chinese were poor and struggling to meet their basic needs at that time, I had nothing to complain about. I just vowed that I would contribute to bettering people's living standards in the future.

Despite the meagre circumstances of my family life, I had a joyous childhood and there was plenty to compensate for any lack in material prosperity. It was a pity that my mum was not around, but this negative was turned into a somewhat positive factor by my father's conscientious efforts. Because of our circumstances, my relationship with my father was not a traditional Chinese father-daughter relationship. I became his little friend and confidant. I was very much trusted and respected by my father. He had to discuss with me every daily chore as his equal to make sure I could look after myself when he was away at work. He treated me as a little adult and I matured quickly and lived up to his expectations. He actually turned me into a tomboy and that tough mind was embedded deep into me. We were very interdependent and close.

Our life was simple, so my father and I had plenty of time strolling to Tian'anmen Square at evenings and the Forbidden City on weekends, taking pictures of the stone lions and the magnificent ancient architecture. On National Days, we climbed up the artificial hill to watch the fireworks. Such splendour! And I wished for a beautiful future.

Beijing, the capital city of China, had been the capital city for many dynasties. It is an historic city with rich Chinese culture manifested in the grand and elegant ancient architecture, red wooden pillars, glazed tiles and white marble lions. Living in the cultural and political centre of China, a child could not help but develop a pride in her nation and a desire to help maintain this glory.

The democratic dialogue that was a feature of my life with my father provided a context for me to find my own way in the world of language and learning. Mingling with people from a range of nations in the streets of Beijing, I began to realize that our country was not isolated but connected with the whole world. I began to feel curious about other people and other countries.

MY FIRST CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH A FOREIGNER: AN EYE-OPENER

During one of my train trips, I met a Canadian student who studied at the Academy of Foreign Languages in Beijing, and it was an unforgettable event in my childhood.

My father and I boarded the train at the platform of Beijing. Upon entering the car, I suddenly saw a foreigner sitting opposite our seat. At first, I could not believe my eyes, yet, casting a second look, I knew for sure that there was really a young, blue-eyed, white foreigner sitting there. Even though I had had so many train trips, this was an experience that occurred once in a blue moon. And although I saw a lot of foreigners at a distance in the streets in Beijing, it was the first time a foreigner was actually sitting opposite to me, so close. It was breathtaking to discover a foreigner in an economy sleeper. We Chinese assumed that all foreigners could afford richer means of travel, and that they were infinitely distant and superior to ordinary Chinese.

It was the mid-1970s before the implementation of the Open and Reform Policy in 1978, and at that time, Chinese people were timid and cautious in contacting foreigners. The adult Chinese people on the train pretended not to see him and he was quite alone. As a child, I could not suppress my curiosity and I felt extremely excited, although I did not dare to break the ice. I stared at him with full attention as a six-year-old child usually does at a novelty. He noticed my gaze and started to greet me in very friendly Chinese:

“你好! 小朋友。” “Hello! Little friend.”

Hearing this, my instant response was great relief that he could speak Chinese and my fear was reduced a lot, but I was not sure how much Chinese he could speak.

“你好!” “Hello!” I replied.

“你是不是和你爸爸一起旅行呀?” “Are you travelling with your daddy?” he asked, continuing the conversation.

“是的。” “Yes.” I nodded and answered.

“你们到哪里去呀?” “Where are you heading for?”

“我们到浙江省去看我妈妈。” “We are going to my mother in Zhejiang Province.”

Up to now, I was amazed by his standard Chinese pronunciation and felt at ease talking to him.

“浙江?” “Zhejiang?” He imitated the name of the province in a funny exaggerated way, which made me chuckle a bit.

“它在海边, 在很远的南方。” “It is at the seaside in the south, very far away.” I explained.

“嗯, 我从来没听说过这个地方。” “Um, I have never heard of this place.” He shrugged and threw his hands into the air.

I laughed and found he was actually a big boy, very young, not as serious and mature as my first glance indicated. So I took the initiative and asked him:

“你的中文怎么这么好呀?” “How come you speak such good Chinese?”

“我现在在北京外国语学院学中文。” “I am studying Chinese at the Academy of Foreign Languages in Beijing,” he explained.

I was quite glad that we were able to talk freely.

“哦。” “Oh.” I murmured, planning to venture my big question. As a child, I did not have much tact, and I could not hold back asking bluntly:

“你的脸怎么破了?” “Why do you have scratches on your cheeks?”

All at once, I felt a nudge at my elbow and heard my father whisper, “别问这么没礼貌的问题! 注意你的礼貌!” “Don’t ask such a rude question! Mind your manners!”

Startled by my father’s sudden utterance, I was a bit at loss.

But the young man laughed, and quickly came to my rescue, reassuring my father:

“哦, 没关系。我不在意。她是个有礼貌的小朋友。” “Oh, it doesn’t matter. I don’t care. She is a polite little friend.”

Knowing my father felt uncomfortable about scolding me, I felt funny about his nervousness with a foreigner.

The foreign student was really amused by my childish question.

“我的胡子太浓了,” “My beard is too heavy,” he explained, “所以我不得不使劲地……” “So I have to ...” He lost his word and had to make gestures of shaving.

“刮。” “Shave,” I hinted.

“对, 刮。很使劲很使劲地刮。” “Yes, shave. Shave very, very hard.”

“那你为什么刮地那么使劲呢?” “Then why did you shave so hard?” I pursued my question.

He flushed and an expression of embarrassment flashed across his face.

“我想让我自己看上去更象中国人一些。” “I wanted myself to look a bit more like a Chinese male,” he answered shyly, “中国男人的胡子都很淡。哦, 我看上去很不一样。我不喜欢和大家不一样。” “Chinese males have light beards. Oh, I look different. I don’t like to be different.” He shrugged again, “不小心, 我刮得太重了, 把我的脸刮破了。” “Unfortunately, I shaved too hard and accidentally scratched my face.”

Both of us burst into hearty laughter and soon we were very happy with each other.

“你是从哪里来的?” “Where are you from?” I wanted to know more about him.

“加拿大。” “Canada,” he replied.

It happened that I thought I knew Canada very well, because at that time in China, young or old, almost everyone could recite our great leader Chairman Mao Zhedong’s article, “In memory of Doctor Norman Bethune”, in which Chairman Mao highly acclaimed the spirit of internationalism of this famous Canadian for sacrificing his life in the anti-Japanese War with Chinese people. Because he was a Canadian, I spontaneously felt he was a friend of Chinese people and our friendship was promoted to the level of international friendship between the peoples of the two countries.

“你知道诺尔曼·白求恩医生吗？他为中国人民的抗日战争献出了宝贵的生命。” “Do you know Doctor Norman Bethune, who gave his precious life to the sacred cause of Anti-Japanese War for Chinese people?” I asked him diplomatically.

“哦，我当然知道他。” “Oh, yes, of course.”

He was awed by my knowledge and turned to big topics and explained the pattern of the Canadian Maple Flag and showed me some Canadian money. He told me that he came from the countryside and in his hometown there was a vast field of rape.

“我家乡最美丽的风光是……” “The most beautiful scene of my hometown is...” he tried his best to convey the beauty vividly, so he paused now and then and spoke a bit slowly, trying to make beautiful sentences – “那一望无际的金黄色的油菜花。有一条小溪弯弯曲曲地流淌在油菜花地里。” – “the vast field of the golden rape stretches to the horizon, and there is a little stream winding through the yellow rape flowers.”

Before I reached my destination, the Canadian student got off the train, and waved goodbye, as I continued on my journey. My train trips were between two terminals, Beijing and the southern seaside province, and so it was always me left in the car seeing other passengers off.

This experience of talking with a foreigner made me feel motivated to communicate more with foreigners and stimulated my desire to learn a foreign language well.

ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE AND TWO PARALLEL TRACKS OF MY LEARNING

In 1978, China was beginning to implement the Open and Reform Policy by Chinese Vice-Premier Xiaopin Deng, and the whole nation was called to open up to the outside world. At about the same time, I started my English learning through formal education in Year Two in primary school, after I came to Wuhan City.

My English learning started from textbooks. From primary school up to senior high school, I was taught to recite excerpts from textbooks. This English teaching method coincided with the Chinese traditional way of teaching. School students were assigned a period in the early morning before classes began, especially for reading and reciting English. During this period, students would read or recite at the top of their voices and a teacher would take his or her assessment book and stand by the side of each student in order to check whether the student could recite a text accurately or not.

I never doubted the benefits of reciting. As a good, obedient student, I had no idea of defying authority. In Chinese traditional culture, obedience was taught to me as one of the most valuable merits, and so instead of confronting the differences between my language learning habits and the modes of instruction I received at school, I tried my best to adjust myself to the situation and fill the gaps.

I had my own way of English learning which had always been double track: classroom English learning for academic or bookish English, and independent study (that had become almost like my hobby) to sustain my interest and to learn practical daily English. Although, as an invincible examinee, my overall English learning

experience was quite happy, I doubted the efficiency of formal English learning from an early age.

Due to my carefree, childhood, dialect acquisition experience, I was not very interested in grammar and exercises in my early studies. I enjoyed reciting very much, partly because I liked the rhythms of language, and partly because I liked the one-to-one attention and took pride in my English teacher's praise. In this way, I had built up a strong intuition of English grammar which helped me to pass each examination smoothly. Apart from reciting, I also depended on light reading, guessing and intuition. I learned light-heartedly, pursuing my interests and pleasure.

In China, all English grammar was supposed to have been taught before high school graduation, and although I could not say I fully understood the grammatical rules by this stage, my intuition of grammar fostered by reciting and my habit of light extracurricular reading always gained me a good score in each English test, and I could finish each test well ahead of schedule.

After I entered university, I suddenly wanted to be more scholarly and bought a grammar book, *Practical English Grammar Course* (Zhang, 1992), read it through, and developed my knowledge of grammar at a theoretical level.

Now, as I reflect on my formal learning of English, I understand my double track method was a spontaneous mixture of traditional and modern methods. This experience later benefited me in understanding more about CLT.

MY WORK EXPERIENCE BEFORE CLT

After four years of university education of English Language and Literature at Wuhan University, I gained a degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1992. Upon graduation, I felt very pleased to become a public English teacher at Central China Agricultural University, a key national university in China.

When I walked into the classroom and went straight to the heightened platform in the front and stood behind the podium, I was conscious that I had become the focus of attention – every student cast eyes at me. Facing the neat rows of students, for a moment I felt uncomfortable about being the centre of this little world and I wished the students would move their eyes elsewhere. However, I soon got used to this constant attention. In an instant, I assumed the role of a traditional teacher.

I always found myself puzzled by the students' untouched pages in their textbooks. Even an outsider of the class could tell the progress of the class by glancing at the distinct dividing line between the loose pages which had been read and the tight untouched pages. I asked students curiously: "Why don't you flip the book from the first page to the last page just like reading a novel or a magazine?" My students responded with embarrassment: "But it is an English textbook, not a novel or a magazine." Students' lack of interest in the textbook was obvious in this response. The sentences in the textbooks were a very artificial or academic language, and they seldom had the flavour of a natural language or oral exchange. No matter how well a

learner grasped the textbook, she or he might still be at a loss when trying to engage in real communication.

Although the students did not like the textbook, they were zealous about English in other ways. They were fans of popular English songs and loved the Beatles, the Carpenters, folk music and country music. They also attempted to read English novels such as *Jane Eyre*, *Oliver Twist*, *Gone with the wind* as well as *The Godfather* and *The thorn birds*, although they found them a bit difficult sometimes.

Soon after I took on this teaching post, a student claimed that he had lost the tape script of a cassette of American country music and asked me to rewrite it for him. As a fan of popular songs myself, I willingly accepted the task and with a tape recorder and cassette, I wrote the lyrics down verse by verse and finished it promptly. This gained me tremendous popularity and trust among my students. On hearing of this incident, one of my colleagues remarked that it might be a test my student had given me. If I had failed, the word would have spread and I would have been seen as a fake and lost my students' respect.

I was also learning to put English into actual use. In my first year as a teaching assistant, an embarrassing incident happened when I was assigned to be a co-teacher for an American teacher. We brought a tape-recorder to a classroom, and once we entered the classroom, he asked me casually, "Could you put the plug into the socket?" I stared at him in puzzlement. He took up the cord of the recorder and repeated what he had said, and I jumped at the realization (I knew the word, "plug", but I did not know that it had this meaning, that is, an electrical apparatus). Although this incident was only a matter of seconds, it intensified my feeling that the English I had learned was separate from real life.

Despite this, I enjoyed teaching and mixing with students. Since the age gap between my students and me was very small, it was very hard for me to keep a straight face even if I intended to, so they found me very approachable. I gained the title of Advanced Young University Teacher that first year. And through years of practice, I made myself an expert in leading students to pass the written form of College English Test Band Four (hereafter CET4), and I was always rewarded for my high CET4 pass rate. I took pride in my teaching practice but I could not help noticing my students' declining interest in English over the two years of their programme.

The freshmen's enthusiasm for English learning was almost touching. They just adored their English teachers. It was not an exaggeration to say that the first year of public English teaching was a honeymoon period between my students and me, with me complacent and students full of hope. Gradually, conflicts and problems emerged, and with the second year, especially the last semester of the second year, the disillusion of my students was apparent in the form of truancy and complaints, and that was when I suffered pains and heartache. My students were not satisfied with a certificate in the end. Although they still considered a certificate of CET4 to be a must, they also wanted tangible abilities in using English for communication to show that they had really learned a language. However, since I was a product of traditional teaching myself, I continued my teaching in the ivory tower, disconnected from the outside world, even though the pounding from outside was getting louder and louder.

OPPORTUNITY BROUGHT BY CLT

I belonged to the first generation of teachers required to practise CLT at our university. We had to break our old cocoons to practise a brand-new teaching approach.

The facility upgrade came along with the introduction of CLT, and public English teaching began to be conducted in highly equipped classrooms towards the late 1990s. As Sino-joint ventures were springing up throughout China, communicative English had become a necessity for students in order to take up the jobs available, and the whole society was calling for English reform. The textbook, *New College English* adopted by Central China Agricultural University since 1999, marked the amazing change from the traditional teaching pedagogy to the experiment of new teaching approaches for me.

In order to launch *New College English*, workshops funded by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press were organized in different locations for training all the university teachers who were using the textbook. This showed that, in addition to the Government, other social sectors were also actively involved in promoting English teaching, which had broken out of the ivory tower of university studies and had become strongly linked to social and economic benefits.

The year 2000, the new millennium, was also a brand-new start for me. In Hangzhou City in Zhejiang Province, a famous tourist city regarded as “Heaven in the World” in China, I attended my first and only English teaching workshop which was the most beautiful event in my teaching career. During the five-day workshop, I listened to many lectures and appreciated many demonstration classes during which some attendees of the workshop played the role of students. It was great fun and gave me a new horizon. Ever since then, I have consciously tried to apply CLT in my teaching practice.

It seemed that, at the turn of the century, the English craze had reached an unprecedented new height in the whole of Chinese society. The teaching of English was directly linked to the rating of the university. Therefore, along with the new textbook, Central China Agricultural University also spared no efforts in installing multimedia equipment in classrooms, and adding and renovating more language labs. We cast away blackboard and chalk-sticks and had multi-media classrooms allocated to public English teaching. The “Intensive Reading and Writing” period was taught exclusively in a multimedia classroom and the “Focus Listening and Speaking” period exclusively in a language lab. The Intensive Reading and Writing period aimed to foster students’ reading capacity through textbooks and their writing skills through analysing writing techniques and practicing writing short compositions. The Focus Listening and Speaking period targeted listening skills and oral communication activities.

A multi-media classroom had curtains on the windows and it was equipped with a computer, a projector, a white screen on the wall, and there was a whiteboard beside the screen. The computer was connected to the Internet. The multimedia classroom could turn a classroom into a cinema, or the teacher and students could directly log on to the Internet to surf on the Internet together. The Focus Listening and Speaking period was taught in a language laboratory with headphones and microphones and a

computer as a central control. Both classroom and laboratory were quite advanced, except for one obstacle to CLT, namely that they were still organised as rows of fixed tables facing the front. There was also a third type of room called the activity room, which also had multi-media equipment, but with moveable chairs and without tables. Activity rooms could be booked by a teacher and used occasionally if the teacher wanted to transfer her students from a multi-media classroom to an activity room. However, because no tables were provided, students could hardly write anything, and there was no place to spread out their learning materials.

Student-centred communicative English teaching was regarded as a novelty, Western and unfamiliar, so teachers of the same cohort of students were required to form a formal community of practice and build up team work. We met once every two weeks to discuss and standardize the teaching of the whole community and each teacher was required to make PowerPoint slides of a teaching unit and save it in a floppy disc. Once a set of these PowerPoint slides were revised and approved by the teaching community, all the other teachers duplicated it and used it as a major and indispensable part in their teaching. A lot of time was expended on dynamic pictures on slides to make it funny and pleasing to students' eyes. However, in a sense, this made teaching pre-programmed and, when it was not properly used, it obstructed communication in class. I had a feeling that although the equipment we now had available to us as English teachers was quite advanced; the theories and materials of teaching were lagging behind.

MY ADAPTATION TO CLT

Due to lack of proficiency in English and proper training in CLT, not to mention the unsuitable layout of the classroom and the lack of peripheral support of resources, such as authentic English materials, I found it quite beyond my abilities to implement CLT. During the transitional period of economic and educational reforms, public English teachers as a group bore a lot of criticisms and pressure from students, the administration and the whole society. I was no exception. As Liao (2000, p. 5) claims "CLT is constrained by difficulties which limit a wholehearted application of CLT into the Chinese context." And he asserts that "CLT in Chinese context belongs to the weak version" (Liao, 2000, p. 15).

However, this did not mean everything was unfavourable. On the contrary, globalization brought the most favourable era for English teaching in China. English learning had become a kind of worship in the whole society and especially among university students. In this favourable learning atmosphere, it was very easy for me to approach my students and organize various activities in their spare time such as singing English songs, reading English poems, performing a play, holding various English competitions, or just sitting on the lawn chatting. I could really become a starlet with my students as my fans. I found that my students "become ready to learn those things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations" (Knowles, 1984, p. 58).

My students usually gave me cards and fresh flowers on Teachers' Day. They had a strong desire to learn English well, especially to use English practically in daily life. Sometimes they suffered disillusionment and frustration about the difficulties of

learning English, yet they still hoped a magic teacher would fix all wrongs in this shrine of knowledge, the university. Even when I found it difficult to transform from teacher-centred style to CLT, which King (1993, p. 30) described as “from sage on the stage to guide on the side”, they gave me a bunch of fresh flowers and a miniature of the Statue of Liberty to try to persuade me and hasten my transformation.

CONCLUSION

Narrative inquiry in language education research provides a means to grasp the complexities of learning and teaching, permitting the development of ideas for improvements in teaching practice. This kind of inquiry has assisted me to reflect on my rich language experience from the perspective of a teacher and a teacher learner to analyse how I view language learning, and how I should teach English in the future.

My use of autobiographical narrative to interrogate the values and beliefs that have shaped my professional life as a language learner has enabled me to identify valuable strengths from my lived experience, which has helped me to better understand myself, my students and my professional landscape. These strengths include the importance of language learning as a personal and daily endeavour, students’ self-incentive, the role of a teacher as a guide, the practicality of learning materials, and the flexibility of teaching methods and so on.

My self-study exposes me as a product of life. I learned language initially for life, through life and ultimately to serve life. Thus, I have realized the importance of linking language learning to daily life and embedding language learning into students’ personal life experience. As I mentioned before, I doubted the efficiency of formal English learning from an early age.

In addition, I have long realized the mismatch between formal English education and the daily communicative functions of English. My students and I had been struggling between the contradictory curriculum, teaching materials, methodology, and outcomes assessment. My students often felt confused about what formal English education led to and I also had this puzzle in my mind.

Using this autobiographical narrative and self-study, I have a feeling that the ideals of CLT and modern adult education theories are not foreign but something I have treasured and practised daily without even knowing it. My successful experience in language learning during my childhood can vividly exemplify this point. Even before I got to know these complex theories, I could learn languages well through my intuitive invention. With the courage to break the constraints, this realization heralds the feasibility to further promote English for communication in China. This realisation also gives me confidence to follow my intuition with regard to my language teaching practice and to encourage my students to utilise their own rich language learning experiences as they learn English.

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