

Intercultural Communication as Revealed in Language Learning Histories

Evelyn Doman

University of Macau

Abstract

The number of Chinese students learning English around the world is increasing more and more. In order to fully understand the struggles that the students have in adjusting to the new language and culture, we need to listen to the voices of the students themselves. Language Learning Histories provide researchers with insight into the issues associated with intercultural communication, the process of language learning, and the language attitudes held by the learners. Primary themes uncovered in an analysis of 48 Chinese college students, both in a US college EAP program and in a Macau General Education college English program, reveal that motivation, culture, anxiety, self-esteem, and gender tend to be the most important factors affecting students' ability to acquire the English language. Results found that language was an artifact through which students' social and cultural impressions emerged.

Keywords: *language learning histories, anxiety, motivation, intercultural communication*

Introduction

A language learning history (LLH) tells the history of a student's experiences in trying to learn a foreign language (Coffey & Street 2008). LLHs lend themselves to investigations of the person recording their story, focusing not only on the accomplishments of language learning but also on the complications and resolutions that the individuals experienced with the language both inside and outside the classroom (Haines 2012). Students can gain insight into what learning methods have worked best for them and can therefore capitalize on these methods, and teachers and administrators can learn which teaching methods are most successful by reading LLHs. Despite the benefits, the usage of language learning histories (LLHs) is still an area rarely explored. According to Larsen-Freeman (2000: 169), language learners have mostly been studied from an "etic" perspective, which means from the perspective of the researcher, and not from an "emic" perspective, which is the learners' interpretation of their learning experiences. Investigations into language learning histories will help to fill the lack of emic language learning research.

However, whether oral or written, the value of having students share their language learning histories is great (Cummings 2005; Kalaja, Menezes, & Barbelos 2008). According to Nunan (2000), it is important to learn what "learners' accounts of their own histories as language learners reveal about processes of language learning and development" (2000: 1). This type of autoethnographic study is both process and product (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner 2010). It is a co-constructed process through which the researcher creates a conceptual space for the participant to reflect on this experiences through the data collection and analysis stages (Haines 2012).

Valuable information can be gained from comparing and contrasting students' learning experiences through LLHs, other than just help students recognize their learning styles and for teachers to become more aware of classroom practices. In fact, closer observation of LLHs will reveal several issues surrounding intercultural communication, the process of language learning, and language attitudes (Coffey & Street 2008; McNamara 2013).

LLHs shed a great deal of light into students' intercultural communication (Kearney 2010). With the world becoming smaller everyday due to technology, intercultural communication is vital to our survival. Intercultural communication happens when interaction between people belonging to different cultural or social groups occurs. It is important to understand how people communicate across cultures so that we can help bridge the gap between people from diverse backgrounds. LLHs can help us to do this.

At the 2005 Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) conference in Shizuoka, Japan, Professor Martha Cummings of the University of Aizu spoke of the importance of writing our language learning histories as a way to "lead us to a better understanding, not only of ourselves, but of our students and our classroom practices" (Cummings 2005: 19). Moved by her presentation, I wanted to investigate whether language learning histories have a place in studies in Second Language Acquisition or not.

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. Which learning strategies are most useful to Chinese students of English?
2. What issues affect Chinese students' intercultural communication when learning English?

Review of the Literature

In recent years, studies into narrative inquiry have become more numerous, encompassing interdisciplinary fields of historiography, literary criticism, psychology and foreign language studies (Flowerdew & Miller 2008; Gabrys-Baker & Otwinowska 2012; Sakui & Gaies 1999). In narrative inquiry, participants are not subjects of a study but are rather people who offer unique insight into very subjective and personal issues. Language memoirs, or language learning histories, can therefore provide perspective on variation that exists from individual to individual in learning a new language.

Language learning histories have been explored to identify issues such as motivation, attitudes and beliefs, learning styles, strategies and cross-cultural influences, among others. Barker and Otwinowska (2012) asked twenty beginning and twenty advanced students of L2 English and L3 French to produce retrospective narratives on their language learning experiences. The narratives were analyzed for similarities with conclusions being drawn that obvious differences exist between L2 and L3 learning. Interpreted through the threshold hypothesis framework, Barker and Otwinowska (2012) found that fluctuations existed not because of lack of motivation on the part of the learners but because of the structured teacher-fronted instruction and lessons that were prevalent in the teaching of French, which also contributed to students' lack of autonomy in their learning of French.

More was said of learner autonomy in a later study by Flowerdew and Miller (2013). By exploring the life histories of three recent graduates from a university in Hong Kong, Flowerdew and Miller found that individual autonomy could be measured through the amount of investment that learners made to the language learning process. The similarities of the findings may be questionable as all three participants in the study were male, who may or may not have been able to tap into major areas of intercultural communication and understanding, such as gender, public voice and authority (Miller 1996). As women are often marginalized, Pavlenko undertook a study in 2014 which showed that storylines might shift depending on which language they are being recorded in and that female narrators were able to draw on discourses of gender much more significantly than male narrators.

As identity has been an important concept in second language acquisition (Block 2007), investigating language learning histories to discover how learners grow as individuals has become more important, often explored in the model of cultural identity as *being in becoming* (Parry 2003: 100). Haines (2012) used the theory of situated learning to make conclusions about the development of learners' identities in a study of three students in the Netherlands. Findings pointed to the different contexts in which learners thrive and the ways in which their identities are constantly evolving with greater exposure and contact to the target language, findings that were echoes in McNamara (2005, 2010 & 2012).

The implications of investigating language learning histories are numerous. What is most evident, though, is the need for language providers to design curricula which place a greater awareness of the differing learner needs and backgrounds of individual students.

Methods

Participants

48 ethnic Chinese English language students were chosen to participate in this study. 24 of them came from a English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program at a liberal arts college in the United States, and another 24 of them were enrolled in a General Education English program in a university in Macau, China. All participants were between the ages of 18-22 and were first-year, first-semester students when this research took place in the fall of 2011.

Prior to commencing the research project, the proposal and the use of human subjects underwent an extensive ethics review, both in the United States and in China. The author was a full-time faculty member at the institute in the United States where data was collected, while a former colleague was responsible for receiving ethics permission in China before beginning the project. Participants were asked to complete a consent form and were given the option to opt out of the study at any time. While informed that their participation in the study would in no way affect their scores in the courses, all participants in both places of research agreed to serve as participants.

Table 1: *Participants*

Group	Male	Female
Group A (U.S. Group)	10	14
Group B (China Group)	12	12

Language learning histories were analyzed from two different groups of learners. Group A consisted of the 24 ethnic Chinese participants in the United States. They were all streamlined into a lower-intermediate class based on their scores on the English as a Second Language (ESL) version of the Computer-adapted Placement Assessment and Support Services (COMPASS) exam for non-native speakers of English. All of the students were either naturalized U.S. citizens or green card holders (the college does not offer F1 visas to foreign students). As can be seen from Table 1, among the participants in the United States, 10 of the members were male, and 14 were female, with only 4 having graduated from a high school in the United States. Students in Group A attended EAP writing class twice a week for 2 hours each period for a total of 16 weeks. Group B consisted of the 24 Chinese students studying English in China. 12 of the students were male, and 12 of them were female. All of the students in Group B were in the lower-intermediate group based on their scores on the in-house placement exam (level 1 out of 5). Group B students attended General Education English courses for six hours a week during a 14-week semester. None of the Group B students had ever studied or lived in an English-speaking country.

Data Collection

This study partly builds on Cummings (2005). Cummings (2005) developed four steps to explore the origins of students' beliefs on language learning and teaching which include:

1. Brainstorming on the topic of "language learning" and writing a first draft (p. 18).
2. "Reaching out to members of the community" by reading their essays and getting feedback (p. 18).
3. Revision and insight about what they had learned from the activity.

4. Encouraging students to publish their stories.

In the current study, additional methods will be used alongside those which Cummings used, including using pictures and sounds to bring the LLHs to life. The latter methods were inspired by Kalaja, Menezes, & Barbelos' (2008) study on multimedia language learning histories. Pictures and sound addressed the issues which students saw as most important or relevant to them, that is pictures of the learners' most vivid encounter in studying English along with sounds that they associated with English were also. Like in Cummings' study, both oral and written data were collected. Students in both Groups A and B were required to complete identical tasks.

Data was gathered using the following methods:

1. **Brainstorming:** The term "language learning history" was written on the board. For homework, students were asked to produce 20-30 terms which they associated with that topic.
2. **Pair Work and Feedback:** In class students afterwards discussed in pairs the words or phrases they associated with their language learning experiences. Feedback was produced orally. In reporting back to the class as a whole, students in both groups were selected randomly to briefly describe what they felt was the most important aspect of their experiences which they had written about. More detailed information was occasionally asked for by classmates or the teacher.
3. **Introductions:** Students were asked to write the introductory paragraphs of their LLHs. The topic was: As you have learned English as a second language, which strategies have worked, and which have not? What factors and experiences have affected the way you use English to communicate with others?
4. **Drafts:** First drafts of the language learning histories were assigned for homework.
5. **Peer Editing:** Students were then paired up again and asked to read their drafts and to do peer editing to address issues of the content (grammatical errors were not addressed) that they did not understand or that they wanted more information about.
6. **Adding Photos and Sound:** Both groups were told to draw sketches by hand or to use internet animation to depict the most vivid image they associated with their language learning experiences. They were asked to be creative and to add sound where necessary.

It is estimated that the total amount of time that students spent on completing their LLHs from varied from 6-10 hours.

The contents of the language learning histories were analyzed for recurring patterns. The written biographies were coded and sorted into themes that emerged from both groups of participants. From the associative terms the students were asked to produce, a list of five of the most common themes was created. The pictures of the learners' most vivid encounter in studying English along with sounds that they associated with English were also analyzed.

A hermeneutic thematic text analysis was used to compare the data the two groups of learners. Group A was coded as 1, and Group B was coded as 2. Males were coded as 1, and females were coded as 2. The actual number of times that an effect of intercultural communication occurred was recorded according to the number. That is, if 5 accounts of motivation were counted in one student's LLH, then the number 5 was recorded.

Data Analysis

Results

LLHs findings will be quoted as they are written, without editorial changes.

Question One: Which learning strategies are most useful to Chinese students learning English? Lists of the most common strategies that the participants found useful and those they found to be not so useful are as follows (Tables 2-3).

Table 2: Useful Learning Strategies by Count

Rank	Useful learning strategies	A	B	Total
1	Studying or traveling abroad in English-speaking countries	20	12	32
2	Talking with their native English-speaking teachers or friends	22	4	26
3	Games (video games especially)	18	10	28
4	Private tutoring or classes	3	23	26
5	Watching English movies with no subtitles	20	10	30
6	Listening to English songs/memorizing lyrics	16	12	28
7	Reading simple English books (not textbooks)	10	17	27
8	Surfing the internet/getting English	11	11	22
9	Studying their English textbooks	4	21	25
10	Memorizing lots of vocabulary words in English	10	8	18

Table 3: Useless Learning Strategies by Count

Rank	Useless learning strategies	A	B	Total
1	Memorizing grammar	12	22	34
2	Translating texts from Chinese to English	2	19	21
3	Writing vocabulary multiple times to memorize them	7	15	22
4	Tests	12	10	22
5	Listening to language CDs	11	4	15
6	Drilling	9	5	14
7	Doing fill in the blank activities	14	16	30
8	Watching English movies with subtitles	15	5	20
9	Lecture classes	16	6	22

10	Role plays	12	8	20
----	------------	----	---	----

In addition, the following quotes from the participants are included:

Repeating after the teacher helped my pronunciation to better. English is hard to read when you don't know words.....what sounds those words make (Jason, Group B).

I enjoy listen to music, English music, and watching English movies. I try don't look at the Chinese at bottom of movie (Eri, Group B).

Since childhood, I was exposed to English language through cartoon television series such as SpongeBob Squarepants (Jeremy, Group A).

Growing up from that as I was beginning to enter adolescence, I was pre-exposed to computer and video games. I learn English by actually playing games...Since those games were in English, it is imperil for us to actually speak in English (Tim, Group A).

Finally, in college we learn how to speak English, not just translate (Liang, Group B).

As can be seen from Table 2, Group A students found the following strategies to be most useful:

- Talking with their native English-speaking teachers or friends
- Studying or traveling abroad in English-speaking countries
- Watching English movies with no subtitles
- Games (video games especially)
- Listening to English songs/ memorizing lyrics

The last three examples of movies, games and music give validity to the point that exposure to a variety of media in English can be helpful in the language acquisition process. Playing games, watching movies and listening to music were regarded as three of the top five useful learning strategies chosen by these respondents.

Group B students found the following strategies to be useful:

- Private tutoring or classes
- Studying their English textbooks
- Reading simple English books (not textbooks)
- Studying or traveling abroad in English-speaking countries
- Listening to English songs/memorizing lyrics

Regarding the first research question, strategies which the EAP students in America found useful were sharply different from those of the students in the Chinese English course. More than 85% of the Group A students believed living in America and speaking with native English speakers were particularly useful in order to promote their language skills. These were strategies not so much valued among Group B students. Instead the Group B students were pushed to study English harder in classroom settings, and most of them often attended private classes for tutoring after school (over 90%). Neither private tutoring nor studying and reading was in the top five of Group A's list.

It was also interesting to see the learning strategies which both groups viewed as not being very helpful. They did not want to memorize grammar out of context. This sentiment was expressed by several students:

Translate from Chinese to English is just waste of time. Can use dictionary and finish (Miki, Group B).

Teachers like to do translate work so that they can have free time (Chen, Group B).

In China, English class is only English grammar (Jae, Group B).

Americans teach English better than Chinese. More interaction with students, so we can practice what we need outside (San, Group A).

These results showed that both sets of students had had a poor introduction to English. Traditional teachers who relied on the traditional Grammar-Translation Method (GMT) of teaching English left students with little motivation to learn the language beyond what was required for the course.

Question 2: Issues affecting intercultural communication

While reading through the LLHs, five main themes emerged when categorizing the factors affecting the the students' intercultural communication: culture, motivation, anxiety, self-esteem, and gender.

Culture

Culture is one of the factors with the greatest effect on how people communicative with others. Culture was by far the biggest determinant of intercultural communication. 25 % of the participants in the study mentioned culture as affecting their language learning and communication at least 4 times, which is quite a large count for this type of assignment. When totaled separately, Group A showed a mean count of 3.125 while Group B's mean count was 3.250. This documents that culture was in fact a very important factor affecting intercultural communication for both groups of students.

Below are some examples of how culture affected the participants' language learning and intercultural communication.

I just quiet when I am little so I do not like speak English (Ting, Group B).

I don't like being with American friends 'cause they judge the way I eat, like you know, when I eat noodles and make a slurpy sound. They all laugh at me (Joe, Group A).

My class made a haunted house for English Fair and that was fun and made us love English (Yun, Group B).

Americans no use chopsticks so they think I am funny at lunch time and I don't want talk to them (John, Group A).

Americans are too loud; I don't like to talk to them a lot (Vit, Group A).

I am shy being with foreign people (Ren, Group B).

I feel more comfortable with foreigners than I do Chinese (May, Group A).

My English teacher always said look my eyes when she asked question but I feel shy to look at eyes. Not good in China to look at teacher's eye (Liang, Group B).

Motivation

The most obvious theme in the students' LLHs was motivation and how their motivation level affected their communicative abilities. Persons who are motivated to communicate means that he or she has an initial wish to communicate (NCA 2007: 7). Motivation is perceived as positive if the person expects that

to communicate potentially will lead to a reward, such as creating a new friendship, successfully buying something, or finding a solution to a problem.

Students in both groups mentioned motivation (either positive or negative motivation) as one of the main factors which affected their ability to learn English and to communicate in English with others. Only one student among 48 failed to mention the effects of motivation on his language learning, while a majority (60.9 %) of students mentioned it at least 3 times. Counts ranged from 0-7 times in each individual LLH. Table 4 shows that the mean count for both groups was 3.292, and the median 3.0. In Table 5 we see that the mean was 3.625 for Group A, 2.958 for Group B, which represents a significant difference.

Table 4: Means of Motivation Counts

N	Valid	48
	Missing	0
Mean		3.292
Std. Error of Mean		.2646
Median		3.000
Std. Deviation		1.8330

Table 5: Means of Motivation Counts by Group (1= A, 2= B)

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Mot	1.0	24	3.625	1.8839	.3845
	2.0	24	2.958	1.7565	.3585

Several statements from the LLHs which reflect the students' positive or negative motivation are quoted below:

I like to learn English. I just watch movies or listen to music in English. I try to memorize the words (Jill, Group A).

I use my own money from my part job to pay for private classes (Ryu, Group A).

I want to improve English to get better job (Wei, Group B).

English is hard but important. I must learn English to go to college here (Mindy, Group A).

I stay China forever. Never need English. Don't want English (Min, Group B).

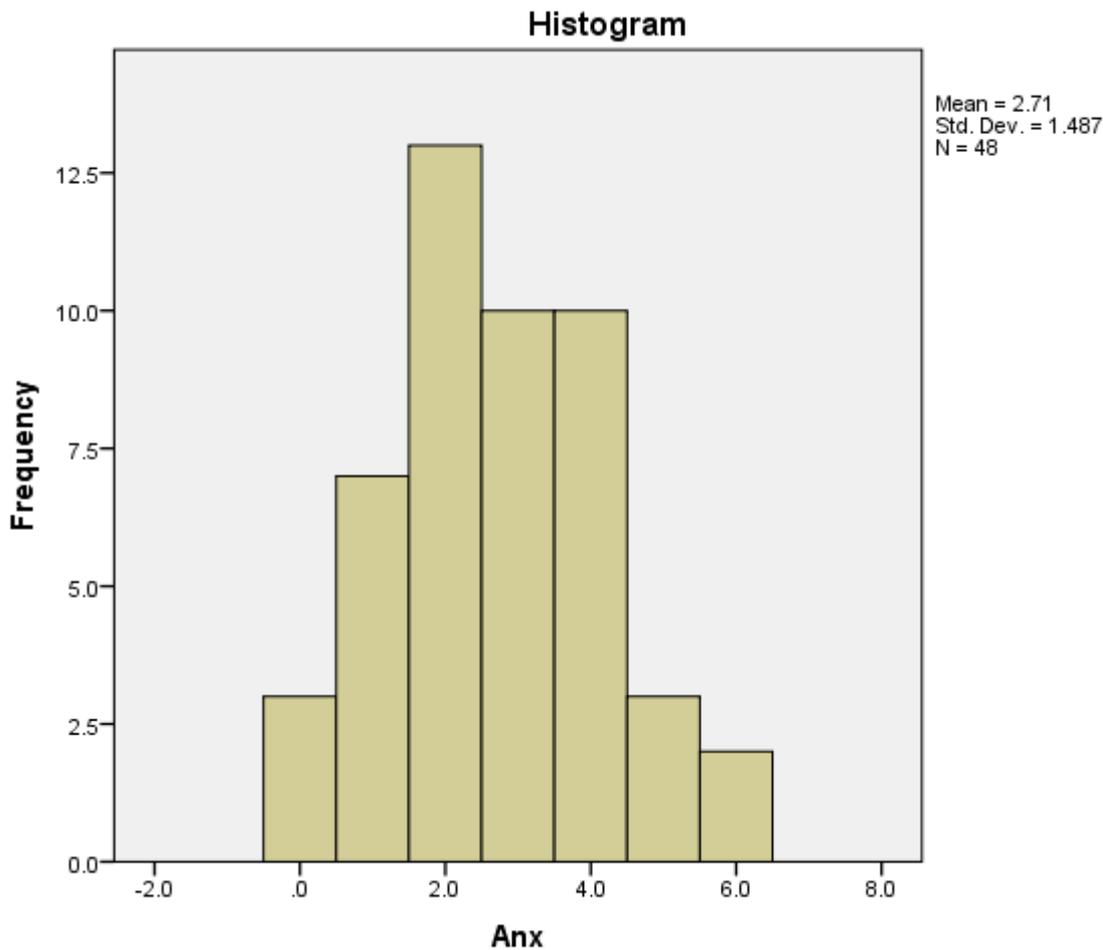
Responses such as these illustrate the various levels of motivation through their choice of approach to language learning.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a source of the experience of negative motivation. Communication related anxiety is the fear a person feels when facing real or anticipated communication with another person (NCA 2007: 7). Anxiety in language learning can seriously impede the attainment of skills. Studies shows that such apprehension towards communicating is displayed in students' first language (L1) as well as their second language (L2). That is, if a person is generally anxious to communicate when they speak their L1, they will be equally or more anxious to communicate in L2 (Hye & McCroskey 2004).

The histogram in Figure 1 shows that most students mentioned the effects of anxiety in their LLHs at least twice, with a mean of 2.71. This means that anxiety in communicating with others in English is a significant factor for most students.

Figure 1: Histogram of the Frequency of Anxiety Counts



In Table 6, we can see that Group A displayed fewer accounts of anxiety, with a mean of 2.583. The number of counts of anxiety for Group B was approximately 0.3 times more, with a mean count of 2.833. This is a significant difference between the two groups, likely accounted for by the amount of practice the students get in English. Even so, when reading through the LLHs, it seemed that both groups of students were quite apprehensive to communicate in English.

Table 6: Means of Anxiety Counts by Group (1= A, 2= B)

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Anx	1.0	24	2.583	1.6396	.3347
	2.0	24	2.833	1.3406	.2736

Examples of anxiety were found in the LLHs, such as:

I get nervous when I have to make presentations in English (Mike, Group A).

I hated English and always sat in the back row where teacher can not see me (Sue, Group B).

I did not like my first English teacher in high school. She stressed me since she was from American and I could not understand her (Cheong, Group B).

My favorite is playing games, which helps me to relax while studying (Ming, Group A).

In English class I get so nervous I forget things I know (Lucy, Group B).

While it is natural for students to experience some anxiety in class, it should be kept to a minimum in order for language to be successfully acquired.

Self-esteem

A clear connection between self-esteem and communication is also evident. Self-esteem was mentioned several times by the majority of respondents; 15 out of 48 students referred to lack of self-esteem three times as a major deterrent in communicating with people in English. This accounts for 31.3% of the total. 29 out of 48 mentioned it 3 or more times. The mean was 2.83, with a standard deviation of 1.31.

It is interesting to note in Table 7 that the number of counts related to self-esteem was higher for Group A than for Group B (0.25 times higher).

Table 7: Means of Self-esteem Counts by Group (1= A, 2= B)

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Self E	1.0	24	2.958	1.4885	.3038
	2.0	24	2.708	1.1221	.2290

When the reasons were investigated further, it seemed that because students in the American college were surrounded by English in their daily lives, both in school and outside of school, they had to deal with English more, thus providing them with more opportunities to express doubt about their confidence in English. Some quotes from the students' LLHs reveal their amount of self-esteem and its relation to communication in English:

I did not like my first English teacher she made me foolish to speak in front of class (Wong, Group A).

I don't have confidence to make American friends. I like other Asian's countries peoples more (Angie, Group A).

My friends say that I am a good listener and that they enjoy speaking with me in English (Teresa, Group A).

I love speaking English; I don't feel shy speaking all people in English (Bo, Group A).

Other students are better at English than I am (Art, Group B).

As can be seen from the responses in the students' LLHs, self-esteem issues affected the types of friends they made, their pleasure or displeasure in learning English, and their motivations in learning.

Gender

Gender differences may also affect the development of a person's intercultural communication skills. This may be true for verbal communication as well as non-verbal communication, such as gestures, eye contact, and other types of body language. Even so, gender tended to be the least problematic factor for both groups of Chinese students. Table 10 shows that 39 % of all the 58 participating students did not mention gender at all. Particularly in the group studying in America (Group A), gender was only mentioned a total of 8 times. Below are some comments reflecting the effects of gender:

I tried to have American boyfriend, but he never understood me (Ying, Group A).

I can talk to American boys, but never to American girls (John, Group A).

My English teacher started crying in class one day, crazy woman. I never understand that (Lam, Group B).

Even with comments like those above being categorized as gender factors, it may be inconclusive without further questioning of the statements. It may be that other problems existed besides the gender of the person being communicated with. Also, with the age of the students all being 18-22 years old, perhaps they were still not comfortable with members of the opposite sex.

Discussion

In this paper I have attempted to show how language learning histories may provide insights into SLA. Conflicts may exist between the pedagogical and social functions within the classroom and between the students' language abilities and unique learning experiences and the teachers' pedagogical strategies or teaching methods.

Each of the learners in both student groups brought with them a unique history, and each reacted differently to the challenges of learning English. The personal reflections in the writing and presentations of students' language learning histories revealed when and how students began learning English, what their first impressions of learning a new language were, how those impressions changed over time, in-class and out-of-class experiences which shaped their views on learning English, their identity issues, beliefs, fears and desires, teachers which affected them either positively or negatively, and their views of themselves as either a good or poor language learner. Besides helping the learners to understand how they learn languages individually, such information gained through language learning histories may also provide important insights into SLA.

What affected the students' intercultural communication most were the factors of culture, motivation, anxiety, self-esteem, and gender. While culture was by far the biggest determinant, motivation, anxiety and self-esteem were also vital components of the communication process. Gender proved to have less influence on these Chinese students' language acquisition, both in China and in the U.S.

The strategies which the two groups of students found useful were sharply contrasted. Group A students gave particular importance to living in America and speaking with native English speakers in order to promote their language skills. Group B students were not as keen on traveling and speaking with English speakers since they had few opportunities for doing so in both the present and in the predicted future. The top three strategies among the latter group of students were private tutoring and reading on their own. Neither private tutoring nor studying and reading was in the top five of Group A's list.

Perhaps we can conclude that students in America used a wider variety of strategies in learning English and seemed to be aware of the skills they were trying to accomplish. As the participants in the American

class were exposed to more authentic English on a regular basis, had been living in an English-speaking country, and had more contact with English speakers, they appeared to understand themselves better as language learners in an ESL as opposed to an EFL setting, and could more easily define which strategies worked better for them as opposed to other strategies.

Even though the Grammar-Translation Method is still alive and strong in China, most of the students believed that translating actually did not help them to learn English. The importance of English was not revealed to them until much later; for most, it occurred when they entered university and were required to participate in more communicative classes.

Culture

Culture influences not only our beliefs and values, but also word meanings and message interpretations. What is considered polite in one country may be rude in another. Most of us assume that what we do in our own culture is “right” and that people who don’t do the same are “wrong.” Therefore it is very important to do our very best to understand what is communicated from the other’s perspectives and to become aware of other cultures as we learn a second language. For people to become effective intercultural communicators, “they need to be interested in other cultures, be sensitive to cultural differences, and show respect for others’ cultures” (Bhawuk & Bristol 1992).

Motivation

The findings show that Group A must have been more motivated to learn English and to communicate with others in English than Group B. The reason for the difference could be accounted by the environmental differences. Students in the U.S. must use English in order to do well in college by communicating with partners, groups, teachers, and other administrators at the school.

While some students are motivated to be more active through taking extra classes, others prefer a more laid back approach by learning through the use of media. It was interesting to see the influence that media had on some of the students’ desire to improve their English. Exposure to multimedia seemed to improve their language skills, or so they believed.

Both approaches show motivation to learn more English and to become better intercultural communicators. Sylvia (Group A) represent a third approach as she had made friends from a wealth of countries through the educational program she attended. The sole common language among her co-students was English and communicating in that language allowed them to get to know and understand one another. She wrote: “I could improve my English by talking with them (friends) in English, but I also broadened my personality as I went to language school just by myself.” In this way, Sylvia’s attitude was a balance between the first and second learning approach in addition to her daily use of the English language.

Anxiety

Since this study involved participants who were forced to communicate in English much of the time (Group A), it was assumed that their levels of apprehension would have been much lower than the findings indicate. It also seems obvious that as students’ anxiety increased, their intercultural sensitivity decreased. For some students’ anxiety seems to be triggered when foreign language teachers’ backgrounds are different from those of their own. In such cases anxiety is intertwined with cultural aspects of intercultural communication. Interaction with members of a different cultural group often leads to anxiety for many people.

In the classroom students’ levels of anxiety may be higher than any other place on campus (Moore 2007). Language acquisition may be severely compromised when anxiety levels are high. Studies show that individuals are more likely to acquire language when “their anxiety level is at zero and when the individual believes that they will be successful at learning the target language” (Young 1992: 427).

One way in which teachers can reduce anxiety is through games and interactive activities which allow students to have fun and learn at the same time. Some students are likely to have anxiety attacks when

called upon to present in front of the class or to answer questions aloud when called upon by the teacher. Students with high levels of anxiety may exhibit particular signs such as forgetfulness, avoidance, and distraction. They may prefer to sit in the back of the classroom far away from the teacher and other classmates, in hopes of not being called upon (Moore 2007).

Self-esteem

Self-esteem allows a person to feel that they are of value. In the LLHs self-esteem and motivational issues sometimes intertwined. For example, a positive amount of self-esteem tends to motivate individuals to get along well with others. When language learners have low self-esteem, they may avoid any anxious-provoking situations such as talking in a foreign language and avoid taking part in any intercultural communication.

Gender

Although men's and women's communication tends to be different in expression, it is important not to have a generalized assumption about the persons we meet. Thusly we can become more sensitive to the verbal and nonverbal language of the person with whom we speak.

Limitations and Implications

As this study basically is a qualitative study in spite of the quantified findings, its findings are not generalizable. The small sample size points additionally to generalizations not being possible. Moreover, the context of the writing and presentations of the LLHs and the structure of the assignment and instructions may pose problems since all of the respondents had a prior relationship with the researcher, which may have influenced the findings. Additionally, data collection through LLHs was not longitudinal and therefore does not reflect the participants' changing beliefs towards English learning and communicating with others in English over time.

Despite these limitations, the many interesting aspects of language acquisition found in this paper would not have been easily found through other research methods. The use of LLHs proved to be a powerful tool for reaching better understanding of the strategies which worked for students and those which did not work when learning English, and the factors which affected their intercultural communication. My hopes is that LLHs will find a place in all second language classrooms. Specifically, I propose that teachers:

- Create venues for students to discuss effective language learning strategies.
- Host panel discussions about influences on intercultural communication.
- Invite outside speakers to come to class to discuss benefits of LLHs and how to apply them in their learning experiences.

Further research into this area could include the following:

- Do students who are new foreign language learners experience more anxiety than those in advanced classes?
- What events tend to elevate students' anxiety levels in class?
- How can culture best be taught in an EFL environment?

My contention is that LLHs do have a place in SLA and should be utilized more often. In using language learning histories to understand something of how SLA works, Gao (2005) holds that in attempting to capture the developmental processes of learners' language learning approaches, the deep impact their learning settings and situations have on their perceptions of self and language learning can be revealed. Further investigations into language learning histories should therefore be conducted. According to Nunan (2000), "It is not simply important to hear our learners' stories; it is essential. There has not been a

single learner story that hasn't made me think twice about what I do in the classroom" (2000: 4). The author of this current study could not agree more.

References

- Bhawuk, D.P.S. & Brislin, R. (1992). The measurement of intercultural sensitivity using the concepts of individualism and collectivism. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 16, 413-436.
- Block, D. (2007). The rise of identity in SLA research, post Firth and Wagner (1997). *The Modern Language Journal*, 91, 863-876.
- Coffey, S. & Street, B. (2008). Narrative and identity in the "Language Learning Project". *The Modern Language Journal*, 92(3), 452-464.
- Cummings, M. (2005). The untold story: Writing our language learning histories. *The Language Teacher*, 29, 17-19.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical Social Research*, 36(4), 273-290.
- Flowerdew, J. & Miller, L. (2008). Social structure and individual agency in second language learning: Evidence from three life histories. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 5(4), 201-224.
- Gabrys-Barker, D. & Otwinowska, A. (2012). Multilingual learning stories: Threshold, stability and change. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 9(4), 367-384
- Gao, X. (2005). A tale of two mainland Chinese English learners. *Asian EFL Journal*, 7 (2). Retrieved August 11, 2012 from <http://asian-efl-journal.com/quarterly-journal/2005/06/29/a-tale-of-two-mainland-chinese-english-learners/>
- Haines, K. (2012). "Stories from No-Man's Land?" Situated language learning through the use of role models in the context of international Higher Education. *Apples – Journal of Applied Language Studies*, 6(1), 1-22. Retrieved from <http://apples.jyu.fi/issue/view/8>
- Hye, Y.J. & McCroskey, J. (2004). Communication apprehension in a first language and self-perceived competence as predictors of communication apprehension in a second language: A study of speakers of English as a second language. *Communication Quarterly*, 52(2), 170-181.
- Kalaja, P., Menezes, V. & Barbelos, A. (2008). *Narratives of Learning and Teaching EFL*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kearney E. (2010). Culture immersion in the Foreign Language Classroom: Some narrative possibilities. *The Modern Language Journal*, 94(2), 332-336.
- Lam A. (2002). Language policy and learning experience in China: Six case histories. *Hong Kong Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 7(2), 57-72.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000). Second language acquisition and applied linguistics. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 20, 165-81.
- McNamara, T. (2005). 21st century Shibboleth: Language tests, identity and intergroup conflict. *Language Policy*, 4(4), 1-20.

McNamara, T. (2010). Reading Derrida: Language, identity and violence. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 1(1), 23–44.

McNamara, T. (2012). Language assessments as shibboleths: A poststructuralist perspective. *Applied Linguistics*, 33(5), 564–581. doi:10.1093/applin/ams052

McNamara T. (2013). Crossing boundaries: Journeys into language. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 13(3), 343-356.

Miller, J. (1996). *A tongue, for sighing*. In Maybin, J. and N. Mercer (eds), *Using English from Conversation to Canon*. London: Routledge, pp. 275-310.

Moore, K. (2007). Intercultural Communication and foreign language anxiety. Electronic Thesis, Treatises and Dissertations. Paper 2316. Retrieved August 10, 2012 from <http://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/etd/2316>.

National Communication Association (NCA) (2007). *Assessing motivation to communicate: Willingness to communicate and personal report of communication apprehension*. 2:nd edition. Morreale, S. (Ed.). Washington DC: National Communication Association.

Nunan, D. (2000). Seven hypotheses about language teaching and learning. *TESOL Matters*, 10(2), 1-4.

Parry, M. (2003). Transcultured selves under scrutiny: W(h)ither languages? *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 3(2), 101–107.

Pavlenko, A. (2001). Language learning memoirs as a gendered genre. *Applied Linguistics*, 22(2), 213-240.

Sakui, K., Gaies, S.J. (1999). Investigating Japanese Learners' belief about language learning. *System*, 27(4), 213-240.

Winke, PM. (2007). *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Article in: *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge University Press.

Young, D. (1991). Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment: What does language anxiety research suggest? *The Modern Language Journal*, 75, 426-439.

About the Author

Dr. Evelyn Doman is the Director of the English Language Centre at the University of Macau. Evelyn received her doctorate in Applied Linguistics (with a concentration in Second Language Acquisition) from Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. She has taught ESL and EFL for the past 20 years at various universities in Korea, Japan, the United States and now Macau. Her research interests include learner autonomy, Processability Theory, focus on form instruction, and intercultural communication. She is particularly interested in the flipped language classroom and ways to promote independent learning both inside and outside the classroom.

Author's Address

Dr. Evelyn Doman
Director, English Language Centre
University of Macau
Avenida da Universidade
E7-2023
Taipa, Macau, China

Office: (853) 8397-8128
E-mail: edoman@umac.mo
Website: www.umac.mo/elc

Journal of Intercultural Communication, ISSN 1404-1634, issue 38, July 2015.
URL: <http://immi.se/intercultural>