An investigation into Chinese ESL learners’ perceptions of English language teaching and learning in Australia: A case study of an English language training program

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Abstract

In recent decades, with the rapid economic development of China, there has been a large influx of Chinese students into Western countries to pursue their studies. Empirical research by Yu and Shen (2006) indicates that some international students have difficulties adapting to the Western learning environment due to linguistic and academic challenges. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, this thesis examines how Chinese ESL learners perceive English language teaching in Australia and the learning difficulties they face. By doing so, it seeks to help instructors make informed pedagogical decisions and assist learners in addressing these difficulties. Ten Chinese students who were or have been enrolled in an English language program at Macquarie University participated in qualitative interviews. Meanwhile, the researcher observed five English sessions to gain a better understanding of Western teaching pedagogy. The findings reveal that the participants show highly positive attitudes toward the communicative approach, and mostly favor grammar instruction within communicative practice. The learning difficulties they experience are mostly influenced by their prior exposure to Chinese teaching and learning styles. English language teaching at Macquarie University is communication-oriented and learner-centered, and generally corresponds with what the learners reported during the interviews.
Statement of candidate

I certify that this thesis titled “An investigation into Chinese ESL learners’ perceptions of English language teaching and learning in Australia: A case study of an English language training program” has not previously been submitted for a degree in any university.

I also certify that this thesis was written by me. It contains no information previously published or written by others except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Additionally, I certify that the research was approved by Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee. The reference number is 5201800063.

Jie Fan

October 2018
1 Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Statement of the problem

In recent decades, with the rapid economic development of China, there has been a large influx of Chinese students into Western countries to pursue their studies, particularly English-speaking countries such as the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Yu & Shen, 2006). According to a recent Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report (2015), China remains the world’s largest source country of international students, and plays an important strategic role in the international education market. The Sydney Morning Herald (Koziol, 2018) recently reported that at the end of 2017, Chinese students accounted for 43.3% of the total international student cohort in Australia. While international students have brought financial inflows and cultural diversity to Australian university communities, some encounter linguistic and academic challenges, and find it difficult to adapt to the Western learning environment (Ashton-Hay et al. 2016; Floyd, 2015; Skyrme, 2007). Because students’ learning experiences in their home country are likely to influence their learning in the host country, it is necessary to “discover their feelings and beliefs about language learning experiences” and understand their needs and expectations in the host society so as to “review and possibly change the teaching process” (Barkhuizen, 1998, p. 86). In this way, it will be possible to minimize discrepancies between teachers’ beliefs and learners’ beliefs.

1.2 The purpose of the study and research questions

This study will investigate how Chinese ESL learners perceive English language teaching in Australian contexts, and what learning difficulties they might face with a view to helping instructors make informed pedagogical decisions, and assisting learners in addressing these difficulties. To this end, the following research questions are formulated for the study:

1) What are Chinese ESL learners’ perceptions of English language teaching and learning in Australia?

2) What are Chinese learners’ perceived English learning difficulties in Australia?

3) What are the major characteristics of English language teaching at the English Language Centre (ELC) of Macquarie University?
1.3 The significance of the study

Understanding learners’ perceptions and learning difficulties is of great significance to both educators and students.

1) Horwitz (1988) argues that a major obstacle to the attainment of learning outcomes is due to the failure to take learners’ perspectives into consideration. A greater awareness of learners’ beliefs and attitudes may help teachers from students’ home countries and host countries (i.e. both Chinese and Australian teachers) to adopt better approaches and plan appropriate language instruction that is geared to learners’ needs and interests.

2) Reflections on on-going learning experiences may help to increase learners’ awareness about desirable learning strategies and motivation (Dörnyei, 2001).

3) Chinese learners constitute the largest population of international students in Australian tertiary institutions. However, the stereotype of such students in the literature as “obedient listeners” (Atkinson, 1997) may be an overgeneralization. This study intends to contribute to the general understanding of Chinese ESL learners’ perceptions, and of the roles they would like to adopt.

4) Education is a very important sector of the Australian economy, and Chinese students constitute a major source of revenue for most Australian universities. Any improvement in the educational experience of these students is likely to enhance the image and reputation of these institutions (Sawir, 2005).

1.4 The context of the study
1.4.1 English language teaching in China

English language teaching in China has undergone great changes since the reform and opening-up policy of the late 1970s, as the Chinese government has recognized the importance of English to speed up social development and realize the modernization of the country. Chinese English learners also view English as vital to self-development, enabling overseas study and career advancement (Hu & Gu, 2002).

However, the central role of traditional teaching methods in most Chinese public schools (such as the audiolingual and grammar translation methods) seem not to have kept abreast with the developments in pedagogical theory, with students being trained to be “structurally competent but communicatively incompetent” (Huang & Conti, 2009). Recently, communicative and task-
based language teaching methods have been strongly promoted in secondary schools and universities in China, as demonstrated by a series of modifications and revisions to the national English language curriculum, and text books that emphasize learner-centered approach and promote communicative pedagogy (Wang & Lam, 2009). For example, the Education Bureau in Hong Kong has promoted task-based language teaching (TBLT) since the mid-1990s (Littlewood, 2006); while in mainland China, the *English Curricular Standards for Compulsory Education*, published in 2011, advocates “student-centered, task-based and communicative instruction” (Liu, Lin & Wiley, 2016, p.139).

Despite these efforts, curriculum goals and instructional practices have proved challenging to implement, and communicative language teaching (CLT) has not gained widespread support among Chinese teachers of English (Hu, 2003). According to the literature, this is mainly explained by cultural constraints (Hu, 2002), economic disparity (Hu, 2005), high-stakes testing structure (Ruan & Leung, 2012; Li & Baldauf, 2001), limited instructional time (Chung & Huang, 2009), large class sizes, and a lack of student motivation (Rao, 2002). For example, Hu (2002) views the culturally rooted assumptions of the roles of teachers and learners as major constraints hampering the development of CLT in Chinese society, where teachers are perceived as authorities and transmitters of knowledge, while students are expected to be receptors and sponges that passively soak it up. Clearly, these sociocultural traditions of learning exert a significant influence on “how learners perceive the teaching-learning process and how to interact with teaching methodology” (Tudor, 2001, p. 20). In their study conducted among 73 Chinese English teachers, Li and Baldauf (2001) considered that the exam-oriented educational system in China is the main obstacle to the implementation of CLT. Exams tend to focus on the aspects that are easily evaluated, such as knowledge of grammar and vocabulary (Ching & Huang, 2009). Under such exam pressure, teachers are given little autonomy and time when it comes to the selection of teaching materials (Li & Baldauf, 2001); therefore, CLT is only applied on special occasions, such as when teaching superiors visit a school to evaluate the standards of teaching (Li & Baldauf, 2001). Generally, teaching materials reflect the objectives of the curriculum, which are to improve learners’ communicative competences. Nevertheless, they are not congruent with the current testing system, and present one of the challenges that shape both teachers and learners’ beliefs (Li & Baldauf, 2001).

In short, the reform of English language teaching in China still has a long way to go. The effective implementation of Western teaching methods is constrained by various factors, including social, economic, cultural and educational issues that are specific to China.
1.4.2 The Chinese culture of learning

Culture plays an important role in guiding the interpretation and construction of meanings (Cortazzi, 1990); therefore, an investigation of the Chinese culture of learning and learning traditions may help to understand Chinese learners’ conceptions of learning, and aid L2 instructors to develop culturally sensitive pedagogies (Kennedy, 2002). The following subsections review the influence of the basic tenets of Confucian conceptions on contemporary Chinese education, and the major characteristics of the Chinese learning culture.

1.4.2.1 Transmissive teaching and passive listening

Cortazzi and Jin (1996, p. 169) define the concept of “culture of learning” as “…frameworks of expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about what constitutes good learning, how to teach or learn, whether and how to ask questions…and how language teaching relates to broader issues of the nature and purpose of education”. This definition frames what teachers and students expect to happen in the classrooms and how they interpret and evaluate each other’s roles and classroom performance, based on their own particular culture of learning (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006).

In the research literature, Chinese learners are typically stereotyped as quiet and passive learners who are respectful of teachers and teaching materials (Atkinson, 1997). Confucianism, (or Confucian heritage culture), is often considered as the root of this perception, given that Confucian doctrine promotes respect for authority, and values conformity and obedience (Wang, 2006). What may be regarded as a reluctance to participate in classroom activity in the eyes of Western teachers may be perceived as the fulfilment of their perceived role as learners by some Chinese students (Parris-Kidd & Barnett, 2011), and teachers who do not spoon-feed their students may be judged to be insufficiently prepared for classes. These mismatched cultural expectations of the nature of language teaching and learning may well cause intercultural misunderstandings and “learning shock” (Gu & Maley, 2008, p. 230) for Chinese students when they travel to an entirely different culture, and experience a fundamental difference between what they expect about English language teaching and the norms that the Australian teachers bring with them (Stanley, 2011).

However, Littlewood’s (2000) research findings indicate that Asian students do not want to be spoon-fed; rather, they prefer to be more responsible for their own learning, and to share their knowledge with their peers in a friendly and supportive environment. Furthermore, Cortazzi and Jin (2001) contend that Chinese students are reflective rather than passive, valuing
reflection and inquiry in the learning process. As such, the stereotype of Chinese learners as “obedient passive listeners” seems to be overgeneralized, and by no means reflects the roles they wish to play in the classroom.

1.4.2.2 Rote learning

In the literature, Chinese learning is commonly described as passive rote learning that relies heavily on repetition and memorization (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). However, this view depends on how we understand the concept of “memorization”. Watkins & Biggs (1996) state that repetition is associated with mechanical rote learning and regarded as a surface approach to learning. However, others argue that memorization precedes understanding, and “can be used to deepen and develop understanding” (Marton & Tse, 1996, p. 16); memorization combined with understanding, reflecting and questioning, provides reinforcement for deeper learning (Lee, 1996), and can be considered as a deep approach (Ho et al., 1999). Thus, there are important distinctions between rote learning (i.e. mechanical learning) and memorization, and the latter should by no means be regarded as equivalent to the former. Depending on the purposes of memorization, learners may have different learning effects and outcomes, and fresh insight into the paradox of Chinese learners is highly needed.

Based on the above brief review of the conceptions of Chinese learning in the Confucian tradition, it can be seen that Chinese teaching and learning are more complex than what have been described by some Western observers. Because any culture of learning is deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts, it is necessary to take account of general Chinese cultural characteristics to understand this matter. On the other hand, there is also a need to recognize the diversity and differences between individuals and groups to avoid generalization or oversimplification (Cortazzi & Jin, 2011). It should be noted that many Chinese students are changing and developing their attitudes in response to socio-economic changes, and previous way of perceiving these groups may be outdated. Further research is required to identify how the dynamics of cultural change and situated contexts influence these students’ perceptions of teaching and learning, as well as their role as learners.

1.5 Definition of key terms

In this subsection, the key terms used in this thesis are presented and explained.

ELT stands for “English language teaching”.
SLA stands for “second language acquisition”.
ESL (English as a second language) learners refer to those who speak different languages and who are studying English in an English-speaking country.

EFL (English as a foreign language) learners refer to those who study English as a foreign language in non-English speaking countries.

L1 refers to a mother tongue or native language.

L2 refers to a non-native or target language.

CLT stands for “communicative language teaching or “communicative approach” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). It can be defined as “a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom” (Richards, 2005, p. 2). The features of CLT can be summarized as follows:

1) Communicative competence is the desired goal (i.e. the ability to use the linguistic system effectively and appropriately) (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Language teaching primarily centers around communicative functions and meaningful tasks (Brown, 2001).

2) It encourages communicative activities where learners are expected to interact with others through pair or group work to negotiate meanings and exchange information (Richards, 2005).

3) It promotes a learner-centered approach; i.e. learners are expected to take on a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning, and to contribute as much as they gain from classroom activities. Teachers are expected to facilitate students’ communication and participate in the teaching-learning process (Richards, 2005).

4) It encourages the use of authentic teaching materials. Materials are viewed as a way of influencing the quality of classroom interaction and language use (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

GTM stands for the “grammar translation method”. Its major characteristics are listed below:

1) It primarily approaches language teaching through memorization of grammar rules and translation of sentences into and out of the target language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

2) More attention is given to reading and writing than to speaking, listening, and pronunciation; accuracy is emphasized, rather than fluency (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

3) Instruction focuses primarily on parsing, i.e. the form and inflection of words, as well as the detailed explanations of the intricacies of grammar, with little attention given to the actual content of the texts (Brown, 2001).

4) The vocabulary is selected from the reading texts and taught in the form of isolated words and through dictionary study (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Explicit grammar instruction is an approach in which deliberate attention is paid to grammar rules in order to recognize linguistic elements efficiently and accurately (Scott, 1990).
Implicit grammar instruction is an approach whereby students acquire the grammar of the target language as naturally as possible, in a meaningful and comprehensible context (Scott, 1990).

1.6 The organization of this thesis

There are a total of five chapters in this thesis. The present chapter, Chapter 1, has identified the major issues of the research field, proposed the research questions and objectives, defined the key terms, and explored the significance of this project to the field of education. Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of the concept of human perception, including how it is defined and approached from different perspectives, as well as the major contributing factors that influence it. It then moves on to a literature review of the learners’ perceptions of different teaching methods. Chapter 3 starts by describing the research design and presenting the rationale of the research approach, and then discusses how participants are recruited and in what ways the data is collected, managed, and analyzed. Chapter 4 presents the results and discusses the research findings. Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter. It first summarizes the research findings, then explores implications and recommendations for English language teaching and learning, and finally concludes by discussing the project’s limitations and possible directions for future research.
2 Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

In the first part of this chapter, the concept of “perception” will be discussed. It is very important to operationalize this concept and identify its key indicators because it is closely connected to the research topic. The various factors that influence people’s perceptions will also be explored, and the literature on learners’ perceptions of different teaching methods will then be reviewed within the research contexts. The focus here is on learners’ perceptions of CLT and GTM, grammar instruction in communicative activities, as well as Chinese students’ perceptions of CLT and grammar instruction in EFL and ESL contexts. The chapter will then explore research on language learning difficulties experienced by international students. Based on the intra-cultural and inter-cultural comparative studies, I will finally summarize the literature and identify the research gaps.

2.2 A review of perception

2.2.1 Approaches to perception

In the work “Human perception and information processing” (n.d. p. 73), perception is described as “the process of recognizing (being aware of), organizing (gathering and storing), and interpreting (binding to knowledge) sensory information”. In the literature, the concept of “perception” has been viewed and considered from different perspectives. From a biological or physiological viewpoint, Smith (2002) concludes that perception involves stimulation provoked by stimuli in the human organs through the five senses of vision, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. This is partly connected with social interactions and how we view the world around us (Nelson & Quick, 2000); in other words, it comprises the formation and establishment of human views and impressions of the external world (Grundmeyer, 2012). Wolfe, Kluender and Dennis (2009) hold similar opinions; they consider perception to be a physical impression that arises from a person’s prior knowledge, idea, or inner sense.

From a cognitive or psychological perspective, Panksepp (1998) views perception as a mental process whereby hypotheses concerning future happenings work together with the information that comes from people’s memories, contributing to the formation and interpretation of representation. Similarly, Bernstein (2010) maintains that perception is represented by the recipient’s learning, memory, expectations and attention. In this way, human perception can be understood as an interpretation of a representation of the world around us.
Merleau-Ponty (2002) takes a different approach, understanding the concept of perception as a domain related to subjectivity and historicity, and as an amalgam of affective experiences such as love and hate, tensions, contradictions, and dialogue.

2.2.2 Factors that influence people’s perceptions

According to Nelson and Quick (2000), there are three contributors that influence people’s perceptions: the characteristics of the perceiver, the characteristics of the target person, and the characteristics of the situation where the interaction takes place.

Some of the characteristics of the perceiver, such as familiarity with the target, attitudes, mood (i.e. positive or negative mood), and cognitive structure (i.e. an individual’s pattern of thinking), contribute to the ways in which they perceive others (Nelson & Quick, 2000).

Furthermore, characteristics of the target such as physical appearance, verbal communication (i.e. topics they speak about, voice tone, and accent), and nonverbal communication (i.e. eye contact, facial expressions, body movements, and posture), also play a significant role in influencing human perceptions and impressions of said target (Nelson & Quick, 2000).

In addition, the social context in which the interaction between the perceiver and the target takes place is a major influence that cannot be ignored (Nelson & Quick, 2000).

Based on the above review, human perceptions can be generalized as impressions, interpretations of representations, and affective experiences. Accordingly, the interview questions that seek to reveal students’ perceptions of ELT in Australia are categorized into three types (see Appendix 1, section B): perceptions in relation to the students’ impressions; perceptions in relation to their interpretations of representations; and perceptions in relation to their affective experiences.

2.3 Studies on English language learners’ perceptions of different teaching methods

2.3.1 Learners’ perceptions of CLT and GTM

The literature offers comparative studies of learner beliefs about CLT and GTM among students in various cultural and linguistic environments. For example, Kavoshian, Medadian and Lorzadeh (2013) distributed a questionnaire among 100 advanced learners at a language institute in Iran to investigate their opinions regarding form-focused and communicatively
oriented lessons. The results indicated that learners showed a greater preference for communicative activities (e.g. group discussions) than form-focused ones (e.g. pronunciation correction and grammar revision). In another case study, Inciçay and Inciçay (2009) used a multi-method approach to examine the perceptions of 30 Turkish university students regarding the effectiveness and appropriateness of communicative and non-communicative teaching methods in their EFL courses. The findings suggested that the participants favored both types of approaches. They were aware of the importance of communicative activities, but believed that traditional teaching methods (e.g. error correction and audio-lingual drills) were also effective in learning English. However, grammar-based examinations were an important constraint to the use of CLT, and decreased students’ motivation and enthusiasm to some extent.

In contrast, other studies suggest that some learners prefer GTM. For instance, Barkhuizen (1998) conducted research among 60 ESL high-school students from Eastern Cape Province in South Africa to investigate their perceptions of learning experiences and classroom teaching activities. The findings revealed a mismatch between teacher perceptions and learner perceptions; to the teachers’ surprise, learners highly valued mechanical language skills, and viewed them as the most effective means of learning English. Barkhuizen (1998) suggests that teachers should be aware of what learners think and prefer to learn so as to work with them to negotiate alternatives. Similarly, in another study targeted at 16 adult ESL learners in an intensive English language program at an American university, Ikpia (2001) found that learners showed enthusiasm for explicit grammar instruction and believed that it was beneficial for the accuracy of their English language learning. In a recent comparative study conducted among a group of Pakistani graduate students, Durrani (2016) also discovered that most learners favored traditional teaching methods, and showed more positive attitudes toward GTM than CLT.

Notwithstanding these interesting group differences, it could be premature to conclude that learners’ perceptions differ across different cultural groups. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that they could well be culture-specific and dependent on the ethnic and situational factors. Some studies have sought to examine the variety and uniformity of learners in cross-cultural groups’ perceptions of grammar instruction. For instance, Horwitz (1999) conducted a study to identify similarities and differences in perceptions of language learning across cultural groups (including American, Korean, Taiwanese, and Turkish learners). The results indicated that, surprisingly, the Korean and Taiwanese learners with past grammar-learning experiences discounted the importance of grammar studies more strongly than their counterparts from other cultural backgrounds, such as the US and Turkey. The researcher surmised that this may be because learners may not be satisfied with their language achievements, in spite of the effort they have invested in grammar learning and translation practice. Interestingly, Horwitz (1999)
also discovered differences in belief in relation to grammar learning between two groups of Korean students. She concluded that the intra-cultural group variation in learner beliefs may be related to individual learner characteristics, such as age, stage of life, language-learning context, and specific classroom practices.

Despite these findings, Horwitz (1999) has not further investigated how language learners’ perceptions change with their learning environment and learning experience. Saito and Ebsworth (2004), by using a mixed research method, examined the variance in beliefs between college-level Japanese ESL and EFL learners. The findings revealed that learners’ perceptions differed with respect to their language teachers and classroom activities in the two teaching contexts. Compared with EFL learners, ESL learners showed more positive attitudes toward classroom participation, learner-centered approach, and physical proximity to teachers. Although the two groups were similar in their views of instrumental motivation, they differed with regard to this factor; more ESL learners learned English for the purposes of furthering education or work, while many EFL learners simply aimed to fulfil university requirements. It can be inferred that these differences reflected in the cross-sectional study are possibly attributable to the completely different teaching contexts and instructional practices, as well as the learners’ motivations to learn English. Similarly, in another study conducted among 32 Korean ESL learners in the US, Mitsui (2009) examined the effect of overseas learning experiences on language learning. The results demonstrated that the participants were interested in learning English using visual, aural, and kinesthetic methods, and showed positive attitudes toward communicative activities such as oral presentations and group work. However, given the students’ familiarity with traditional teaching methods and the influence of Confucianism, the researcher recommended adapting CLT to Korean contexts. As can be seen from the above studies, overseas learning experiences exert a strong influence on the perceptions and socio-cultural values of learners, in particular of East Asian students, who universally fall under the umbrella of Confucianism. Because China is culturally and educationally similar to Japan and Korea, these findings may serve to shed some light on the current research.

Based on the above intra-cultural and inter-cultural comparative studies, learners’ perceptions are generally context-specific. Individual characteristics such as age, ethnic/cultural/linguistic background, L2 proficiency, and learning aptitude may account for the complexity and dynamics of learner beliefs and influence learners’ preferences for particular types of teaching pedagogies (Horwitz, 1999).
2.3.2 Learners’ perceptions of grammar instruction in communicative activities

Early studies tended to focus on the CLT method in meaningful contexts, but overlooked its connections with grammar (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). In recent decades, SLA researchers have examined the role of grammar instruction in the growth of language awareness and development (Schmidt, 1995), and explored its possibilities in communicative activities. For example, Imai (2007) used a questionnaire to examine the beliefs of 166 Japanese high-school students regarding two types of grammar instruction - isolated and integrated form-focused instruction (FFI) - in a content-based ESL program in the US. According to the findings, learners showed preference for integrated FFI, and L2 proficiency was the major contributor to the differences in learner beliefs.

Additionally, some researchers have investigated learner attitudes about grammar learning in reading contexts. In a quantitative study encompassing 49 ESL and Spanish-as-a-foreign-language learners, McQuillan (1994) examined whether the participants preferred grammar exercises or the extensive reading of popular literature. In the reading activities, he further divided learners into two groups. One group was assigned reading materials only, while the other was assigned both reading materials and grammar exercises related to the texts. The results indicated that learners found reading was more beneficial and enjoyable than the pure grammar exercises. Further studies have examined learner beliefs about grammar instruction in writing activities (e.g. Manley & Calk, 1997; Gonzales – Bueno & Perez, 2000). The findings suggested that learner beliefs about error correction can vary depending on the specific situations; however, most deemed that feedback about grammar was useful. Hence, previous studies generally confirm that language learners are most responsive to grammar instruction via a range of modalities such as reading, writing and speaking (Imai, 2007).

In general, learners evince varied beliefs and attitudes about the CLT and GTM teaching methods as a result of individual differences in language proficiency and social contexts. It is therefore necessary to identify where they are coming from and how they approach language study (Barkhuizen, 1998) when making pedagogical decisions. As Kumaravadivelu (1991, p. 107) suggests, “the more we know about the learner’s personal approaches and personal concepts, the better and more productive our intervention will be”.


2.3.3 Chinese learners’ perceptions of CLT and GTM in EFL and ESL contexts

In China (which here includes mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong), curricular changes have been initiated to encompass a more communicative approach to English language instruction. Nevertheless, research has highlighted the challenges in relation to the adoption of CLT in EFL contexts (Savignon & Wang, 2003). For example, based on the data generated from interviews with a group of senior high-school students in Taiwan, Chung and Huang (2009) concluded that learners generally favored communicative activities in the classroom, but they did not perceive them to be an effective way to pass grammar-based entrance exams and enter a good university. Similarly, in another quantitative study that investigated Taiwanese university students’ perceptions of their high-school classroom practices, Savignon and Wang (2003) identified a mismatch between learners’ needs and preferences and their reported experiences of classroom instruction; a majority of learners expressed a preference for communicative practices, while form-based instruction was still dominant in the classroom teaching activities. Moreover, age was found to be a crucial factor in determining learners’ attitudes; those who started learning English earlier expressed stronger and more negative attitudes about form-focused instruction than those who started later.

In mainland China, many studies have recommended the incorporation of communicative elements into traditional teaching styles. For example, by conducting a survey among 30 university students, Rao (2002) found that the major barrier preventing the implementation of CLT was the fact that learners had been accustomed to traditional teaching methods and grammar-focused language exams. Given the conflicts between “what communicative activities demand and what the actual situations allow” (Rao, 2002, p. 98), Rao advocated a combination of communicative and non-communicative activities, giving due consideration to contextual factors and the adaptation of CLT to learners’ needs and demands. Similarly, by surveying 252 high-school graduates from various cities of China, Hu (2005) concluded that uneven economic development and wide variation between local contexts affected the implementation of CLT. Thereby, an ecological approach was proposed to encourage teachers to adopt suitable methodologies that take account of students’ needs, contextual constraints, and instructional resources.

Compared with studies of learner beliefs in EFL contexts, there is limited research into Chinese learners’ perceptions in ESL contexts. Plumb (2008), through qualitative interviews, investigated ten Chinese ESL learners’ views about the effect of CLT on their English language development in a Canadian university. According to the findings, learners believed that
communicative activities played an important role in their oral abilities, self-confidence establishment, and the development of critical-thinking abilities. In another case study conducted among 15 Chinese ESL students and four Canadian teachers in a Canadian language center, Zeng (2004) investigated the role of grammar instruction in communicative activities. The results showed that learners viewed grammar instruction within CLT as an effective approach that helped them to realize the function of grammar and achieve communicative competence. In the light of these findings, Zeng (2004) suggested combining explicit and implicit grammar knowledge in communicative and meaningful contexts.

As reflected in the above-mentioned empirical studies, particular cultures of learning and contextual factors significantly affect English instructional practices. There is also a mismatch between learners’ perceptions of CLT and actual classroom practices in EFL contexts, such as the implementation of ELT reform and policies. As Savignon and Wang (2003, p. 223) state, “careful exploration of the concordance of classroom practice with the attitudes and perceptions of learners” is crucial to determine the success of these changes.

2.4 Studies on the language learning difficulties experienced by international students

With the increasing number of international students in English-speaking countries, their language difficulties arising from the insufficient L2 proficiency have raised much concern, with specific issues reported in the literature including problems with academic writing, oral communication, group participation, and the comprehension of lectures (Robertson et al., 2000; Park, et al., 2017; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Zhang & Mi, 2010; Lee, Farruggia & Brown, 2013).

Robertson et al. (2000) investigated the difficulties experienced by international students at one Australian university. According to the survey results, the issues raised mainly include difficulties in understanding colloquial language, writing reports, and making presentations. Difficulty in taking responsibility for individual learning was regarded as a primary concern. In another qualitative study conducted among 22 international students from another Australian university, Khawaja and Stallman (2011) discovered that the main issue experienced by most L2 tertiary students was understanding the Australian accent.

Research conducted by Wong (2004) shed light on the issue, as he found that language difficulties experienced by Asian international students were attributed to their prior exposure to different teaching and learning styles. According to the findings, some Asian students are
accustomed to the cramming method of teaching, and find it difficult to explore knowledge by themselves and work on assignments independently. Sawir’s (2005) investigation of L2 Asian students confirmed the impact of prior learning experiences on their study. The interview data revealed that influenced by form-focused didactic pedagogy, students found it difficult to communicate in English, and lacked confidence in public speaking. Additionally, Hellsten (2002) researched the transition process of international students into Western settings, suggesting that students’ passivity in classroom activities was partly attributed to the teaching styles to which they had been exposed in the past.

Hence, as reflected in the literature, language limitations and prior teaching and learning styles are associated with students’ language difficulties. To some extent, these difficulties can impact on the learners’ ability to cope with academic demands in Western contexts and make a smooth transition to a new academic environment (Lee, Farruggia & Brown, 2013).

Generally, most of the studies examined in the above literature review are conducted in the EFL context, and there has been little research into what Chinese ESL learners feel about Western teaching methods, and how their perceptions change as a result of their learning experiences and teaching contexts. Although some studies have identified a range of language difficulties experienced by L2 learners in English-speaking countries, there is no research that focuses specifically on Chinese students. In view of this, it would be beneficial to discover Chinese learners’ feelings about and attitudes toward English language teaching in ESL settings, as well as the academic challenges they face in the process of inter-cultural adaptation. This would have great significance for pedagogical decision making and the formulation of learning strategies.
3 Chapter 3: Design and methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will first describe the overall design of the study, and justify the rationale of the chosen research approach. This is then followed by an explanation of the participant recruitment process, and of the data collection instruments and procedure. Finally, the methods of data analysis and analytical procedures will be outlined in detail.

3.2 The design of the study

This study follows the qualitative paradigm, using case study as its method. According to Hull (1997, p. 14), qualitative approach aims to understand “human experiences to reveal both the process by which people construct meaning about their worlds and to report what those meanings are”. As the current study is designed to investigate Chinese ESL learners’ perceptions of English language teaching in Australian contexts and provide a holistic overview of the views of this group in particular, it is in accordance with the major objectives of qualitative research. Furthermore, using words rather than numbers to conduct non-statistical analysis and draw conclusions, this study conforms to the common features that occur in most genres of qualitative inquiry (Riazi, 2016). Hence, qualitative approach is deemed to be the most suitable approach to make sense of and interpret phenomena, in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). It enables me to observe, interpret, analyze, and compare patterns that emerge from words and construct certain themes based on the views of the participants involved in this study (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014).

The case study method was chosen for this paper in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the Australian teaching environment and capture the rich data of teaching practices and learner perceptions. Creswell (1998) and Merriam (1998) describe the case study method as an exploration of a “bounded system” (i.e. a person, a group, an institution or organization) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of context-rich information (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). As ten people participated in this research, they were viewed as a group, and considered as one unit of analysis. Duff (2008) highlights that the key recurring elements of case studies are the inclusion of multiple perspectives or triangulation, particularity, contextualization, interpretation, and in-depth study. By means of various forms of data collection (such as interviews with participants and classroom observation), this study seeks to understand teaching and learning phenomena from multiple perspectives so as to triangulate the data and reinforce the legitimacy of the conclusions (Hamilton & Corbett-
Whittier, 2014). As such, the proposed study will be descriptive, holistic, heuristic, and inductive (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

3.3 Research site and participants

The English Language Centre (ELC) at Macquarie University was chosen as the research site as it is a prestigious Australian English-teaching institution, and Chinese students constitute the majority of its student cohort. Depending on the scores they achieve in the IELTS test, students are placed in a range of language courses encompassing different levels before they embark on their studies at Macquarie University, with each course lasting 15 weeks. The programs on offer are General English (G program), Academic English (A program), and University Entry Preparation programs (P program). Based on students’ desired university course of study, the P program is categorized into different domains, such as business, accounting, and economy (BAE), education (ED), translating and interpreting (TIPP), and so on. Usually, beginners to pre-intermediate students (e.g. those with an IELTS score of between 4 and 4.5) are placed in the G program, while intermediate to advanced students (with an IELTS score above 5) are placed in the A and P programs. Such placement enabled me to recruit students with different levels of English so as to enrich the data and make it more meaningful.

3.4 Participant recruitment

The target group was identified as Chinese learners who were or are currently enrolled in the ELC at Macquarie University. Purposive sampling was mainly used to recruit the participants, as it can focus on the in-depth information that is generated from a smaller number of carefully selected cases (Teddie & Tashakkori, 2009). To accelerate the recruitment process, two channels were adopted. On the one hand, I contacted the center to obtain their consent, and then presented the project information to the potential participants from one selected class to recruit volunteers. On the other hand, I put up advertisements calling for participants on several bulletin boards around the campus, the content of which can be found in Appendix 3. Snowball sampling was also used to gather more participants and make the recruitment process more efficient. To ensure the validity of the data, the primary participants had to fulfill a number of selection criteria - they have to be native Chinese speakers; have completed high school or undergraduate study in China, and have finished a minimum of one 15-week course of an English program at the ELC. This ensured that the potential participants were likely to be
familiar with the Australian learning environment, and therefore able to compare the teaching methodologies of both China and Australia.

From mid-March to April, 2018, around 20 Chinese students contacted me via phone or email to enquire about the study, even though some of them did not fulfill the basic criteria. Finally, ten Chinese students were recruited, of whom eight were recruited through the campus advertisement and two through snowball sampling. These students were between 18 to 30 years of age, and most were from big cities in China. Eight of them have completed more than one course at the ELC and are currently engaged in master’s programs at Macquarie University. Two (Lily and Cassy) are still enrolled in the English courses. The IELTS scores of the participants range from 4.5 to 7. These individual differences indicate that they may have varied educational backgrounds and English language proficiency. The table below shows the participants’ demographic information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Highest degree completed</th>
<th>Degree applying for or majoring in</th>
<th>IELTS test score</th>
<th>Study period at ELC</th>
<th>Residency status in Australia (in months)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Master of accounting</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20 weeks (BAE)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Master of international business</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>20 weeks (BAE)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Master of accounting</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20 weeks (BAE)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1 Participants' demographic information*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
<th>Field of Study</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Duration Unit</th>
<th>Credits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chan</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Master of accounting</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>25 weeks (BAE)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Master of international business</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>25 weeks (BAE)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janice</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Master of international business</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>15 weeks (P program)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Bachelor of management</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>20 weeks (G + A program)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Master of applied linguistics</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15 weeks (TIPP)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pluto</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Master of commerce</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>15 weeks (BAE)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ying</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Bachelor of commerce</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>15 weeks (A program)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: pseudonyms are used for participants’ names.*

**3.5 Data collection instruments**

In this sub-section, the two data collection instruments (semi-structured interviews and classroom observation) are explained.

**3.5.1 Semi-structured interviews**

The interviews were intended to gain an in-depth understanding of Chinese ESL learners’ perceptions of English language teaching in Australia, as well as the difficulties they face in
studying English. They comprise two sections. Section A (See Appendix 1) contains the participants’ personal information such as their name, gender, age, IELTS test score, level of English proficiency, educational background, and residency status in Australia. Section B includes two parts: learners’ perceptions of ELT in Australia, and their learning difficulties. In terms of learners’ perceptions, as illustrated above, for the purposes of operationalizing the concept of “perception”, three specific indicators were identified based on the literature review: impressions, interpretations of representations, and affective experiences. Accordingly, the interview questions were categorized into three types (see Appendix 1, section B): perceptions relating to the students’ impressions, perceptions relating to the students’ interpretation of the representations, and perceptions relating to their affective experiences.

3.5.2 Classroom observation

The classroom observation was conducted to gain a better understanding of instructional activities and methodologies, and to ascertain whether the interview data corresponds with the teaching practices in the class. For this purpose, the observation charts (see Appendix 2) were developed to examine the major tasks and teacher/student activities. This assisted with the analysis of the main characteristics of language teaching at the ELC.

3.6 Data collection procedure

The data was collected in two ways to achieve triangulation: individual interviews with Chinese students, and direct observation of English lessons.

3.6.1 Semi-structured interviews

The data collection spanned a period of about one and a half months and progressed systematically. To ensure the questions were clear, precise and motivating, I conducted a mock interview with a Chinese friend who was a former ELC learner. By attending to her verbal responses and non-verbal cues, I knew where to improve and how to better approach the participants. The interviews were conducted in a pre-booked study room of the library as the quiet and private place not only allowed respondents to share confidential information, but also enabled high-quality audio recording. Given the varied English proficiency of the participants, the interviews were conducted in their mother tongue, i.e. Mandarin, so that the students could fully express their ideas without worrying about their English. At the beginning of each interview, I normally started by introducing myself, and then went over the Participant Information and Consent Form, explaining the purposes of the study, the use of audio recording and the de-identification of the data (pseudonyms were used for respondents’ names) to
alleviate participants’ concerns about confidentiality. Each participant was given enough time to read the form and ask questions. Afterwards, they were directed to sign and date the forms. When the formal interviews were under way, as a warm-up, I normally asked the respondents about their background information (e.g. educational background, current studies, and residence status in Australia) to establish rapport and trust (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). They were also asked to complete the demographic information form to set up an individual file. This assisted me in establishing a general picture of the group. During the conversation, I took notes and nodded occasionally to show interest and encouragement. For general questions (such as question 1 regarding impressions of the ELC), I normally asked the respondents to talk broadly at first, and then used prompts (e.g. topics like teaching activities, environments, exams, and textbooks) to elicit more specific responses. This helped to touch on pre-planned points that they may not have considered (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). When the respondents misunderstood the questions and spoke about an irrelevant subject, depending on the circumstances, I either allowed them to speak in the hope of gaining unexpected new insights, or brought them back to the matter at hand to ensure that the interviews remained on-track and that the data would be useful (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

All the interviews were audio-recorded, and each lasted approximately one hour. After the data was backed up and transcribed, a copy of the transcript was sent to each participant for verification. Finally, the transcripts were translated into English for analysis. To ensure the quality of the translation, a peer check was conducted by a NAATI-accredited dual-direction Chinese-English professional translator.

3.6.2 Classroom observation

After obtaining the consent from the teachers, I observed five classes (two general classes, two academic classes, and one BAE class) at the ELC for about ten hours, with each session lasting around two hours. Non-participant observation was chosen, which meant that I observed classroom events from a distance, without actively participating in the group activities. This allowed me to complete the observation charts, obtain an overview of the situations, and maintain objectivity and neutrality when analyzing the data.

3.7 Data analysis procedures

The qualitative data analysis is illustrated below.
3.7.1 Semi-structured interview data analysis

The interview data was analyzed using an inductive (bottom-up) approach. Specifically, I started by identifying indigenous categories and patterns within the data based on specific observations, and then moved on to making broader generalizations and a tentative theory. In this way, patterns and themes gradually emerged from the data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). This framework yielded useful concepts that aroused my interest and “suggested directions along which to look for potential coding categories” (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). Simultaneously, I employed a deductive approach by first revisiting the relevant literature as a preliminary guide and then exploring the categories that were identified as salient to the topic (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

The analytic procedure involved the following steps:

1) Organizing the data

I first broke up the interview transcripts into two major groups of data in response to the research questions (i.e. learners’ perceptions and learning difficulties), and organized the data in tables accordingly. This organization scheme was designed to help direct my thinking (i.e. coding directions, the creation of themes, and interpretations) to facilitate analysis and generate findings (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

2) Becoming familiar with the data

Rossman and Rallis (2003) suggest that immersion is a very useful way of familiarizing oneself with data, along with analysis and interpretation. During the analytical process, I immersed myself in the interview transcripts, moving iteratively back and forth between and across sections and identifying similarities and differences between individual transcripts to develop a deep familiarity with the data. Occasionally, if something interesting emerged from the later transcripts but not in the earlier ones, I contacted and questioned the earlier respondents to elicit data on the issue of interest. This helped to clarify matters, get any questions that might have been missed (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012), and explore important but unanticipated ideas.

3) Determine coding directions and coding the data

Based on the two aspects of the research questions, I identified key words and phrases relating to the areas of English language teaching and learning, and of participants’ learning difficulties, and then coded, categorized, grouped, and synthesized the data into meaningful and manageable themes for interpretation. In some cases, if the data fell into more than one category, they were regrouped several times, which enabled different aspects and multiple inferences to emerge.
4) Constant comparison

I iteratively compared and contrasted the differences and similarities across categories and sub-themes, and examined the relationships among the concepts in the text. In some cases, word frequencies were quantified to be used to supplement the narrative (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

5) Constructing themes and summarizing the data

After data analysis and interpretation, the order and structure, as well as meanings, became more salient. Two major themes corresponding to the two research questions were determined, respectively Chinese learners’ perceptions and learning difficulties. Three salient sub-themes with regard to the learners’ perceptions also emerged: comparison between learning experiences in China and Australia, attitudes toward communicative activities, and attitudes toward grammar activities. Under each sub-theme, the categories and evidence identified in the transcripts were then sorted and listed, such as the participant name and the pages on which the evidence was found. The same procedure was followed for the theme of learning difficulties. The table below summarizes the themes, sub-themes, and categories.

Table 2 Findings of major themes, sub-themes and categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>Chinese learners’ perceptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1)</td>
<td>Comparison between learning experiences in China and Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•</td>
<td>Learning aims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•</td>
<td>Learning environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•</td>
<td>Teacher/learner roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•</td>
<td>Teaching resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•</td>
<td>Teaching and learning activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•</td>
<td>Connections between the two learning experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2)</td>
<td>Chinese learners’ attitudes toward CLT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•</td>
<td>Expectations about classroom activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•</td>
<td>Attitudes toward communicative activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3) Chinese learners’ attitudes toward grammar activities
   • A preference for grammar learning through games
   • A preference for grammar learning in other modalities
   • Less interest in learning grammar
   • A lack of interest in learning grammar

2 Chinese learners’ learning difficulties
1) Difficulties in academic writing
2) Difficulties in communication
3) Difficulties in independent learning

3.7.2 Observation data analysis

After observing all of the lessons, I developed a general sense of the language teaching in this research context. During the data analysis, I first iteratively reviewed all of notes, and then grouped the data by features such as skill integration, learner-centered approach and grammar instruction within CLT. In some cases, I represented certain activities by summarizing the percentage values under specific categories, such as group work and form-based instruction, to highlight the features of instructional activities.

This chapter has explained the research design and methodology, and Chapter 4 will present the results and discuss the research findings.
4 Chapter 4: Results and discussion

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, based on the coding scheme explained in chapter 3, the results for each research question are presented, divided into themes and sub-themes, and supported with the quotes from the interview transcripts. This is then followed by a summary of the findings for each question.

4.2 Research question 1: What are Chinese ESL learners’ perceptions of English language teaching in Australia?

4.2.1 Chinese learners’ perceptions

4.2.1.1 Comparison between learning experiences in China and Australia

The learning experiences of the participants were examined based on the following aspects: learning aims, learning environment, teacher/learner roles, teaching activities, teaching resources, assessment, and connections between the two learning experiences.

1) Learning aims

The results revealed that learners generally felt that there were different learning aims in the two settings. As a result of the exam-oriented educational system in China, most of them felt compelled to learn English, and perceived that passing exams was the ultimate goals of learning English. In contrast, they considered the ability to communicate with people to be the main purpose of learning English in Australia. For example, Chan commented:

Excerpt 1

I have studied English for many years...However, I feel English study [in China] was basically oriented toward exams. I learned English to pass university entrance exams, the College English Test Band 4... I was instructed and practiced based on the exam requirements. Although students can be trained to achieve satisfactory scores in this way, their English competence, in particular communication skills, may not reach a high level.

Pluto also expressed similar opinions:

Excerpt 2

English instruction in China is exam-oriented and stresses extensive practice. It places
great emphasis on recitations and examination techniques. You are likely to be trained to achieve higher scores, but may end up with a lower ability to use the language.

Monica was interested in English, but felt that her interest had to give way to the exams. She commented:

Excerpt 3

I was interested in English when I was young. However, I found I gradually lost interest because of the need to prepare for exams.

Danna considered such approach to English study as “eagerness for quick success and instant benefits”.

As can be seen in the above excerpts, most students in China learn English with the major aim of passing exams; in most participants’ eyes, this exam-oriented instruction constitutes a utilitarian approach. Even if students are able to score higher marks in this way, their ability to use the language may not be commensurate with the marks they receive. This mirrors the current circumstances of ELT in China. Although the curricular changes have ushered in a more communicative approach to English instruction, they are not congruent with the testing system (Li & Baldauf, 2001) because exams focus more on the aspects that are easily judged, such as grammar rules and vocabulary (Burnaby & Sun, 1989). To achieve good results, learners are trained based on the test framework. As a Chinese doggerel describes, “exams are the teachers’ magic weapon, and grades are the students’ lifeline”.

Conversely, most participants thought that the reason behind learning English in Australia was to develop students’ abilities to use English, rather than to deal with exams. For example, Danna commented:

Excerpt 4

In Australia, teaching and learning emphasize learner autonomy and promote communicative approach…English instruction is aimed at comprehensively developing students’ English competency, and in particular their communication skills.

Lily commented:

Excerpt 5

I think that the aim of learning English [in Australia] is to communicate with people, rather than to take exams.
Furthermore, some learners expressed their expectations of English instruction in China:

*Excerpt 6*

*I think that English instruction in China should be oriented toward practicality and functionality and emphasize oral communication more because the purpose of learning a language is to use it and communicate.* (Janice)

*Excerpt 7*

*I wish that English instruction in China would follow this style [of Australia]. If students are not taught to communicate well, then the system of education needs to be changed.* (Cassy)

The extracts revealed that most participants held positive attitudes about how English was taught in Australia. They considered that English teaching and learning should be aimed at language use, rather than exam success, and that an exam-oriented educational system was not conducive to the development of their communicative competence.

2) **Learning environment**

The results indicated that the participant generally had favorable impressions about the learning environment at the ELC. For example, six out of ten learners described the learning atmosphere as “open and lively”, and two said “relaxed but not sloppy”. However, Pluto differed in her response. She commented:

*Excerpt 8*

*Lessons seem relaxed on the surface, but this is not how they actually are. I feel that I’m under a lot of pressure.*

Additionally, some learners found that the small classes at the ELC were very helpful in providing one-on-one assistance, establishing a good rapport between teachers and learners, and creating a cooperative and communicative environment for discussions and interactions. Six participants agreed that “*a lot of communication takes place between teachers and learners*” and expressed that they were happy with the “*equal student-teacher relationship*”.

Ying and Danna shared similar opinions:

*Excerpt 9*

*The moveable desks and chairs [in the ELC] enable us to carry out group activities very...*
easily. (Ying)

Excerpt 10

Teachers can attend to students’ individual needs and provide one-on-one assistance in the classroom. I feel that [my Australian] teachers are approachable, and the teacher-student relationship is equal. In China, teachers are unlikely to act in the same way due to the large classes. (Danna)

Apparently, the teachers’ approachable manner influenced how the participants perceived their teachers, and the relationships they had with them. This supports Nelson and Quick’s (2000) observation that non-verbal cues play a significant role in students’ perceptions.

Rao (2002) reports that students in China are often frustrated with the extent of group activities on offer as a result of cramped classrooms. In contrast, the participants in the current study felt positively about group activities due to the spacious classrooms and one-on-one assistance.

3) Teacher/learner roles

The results suggested that the participants believed that the roles of teachers and learners were entirely different in the two teaching contexts. They reported that in Chinese classrooms, teachers are usually perceived as authorities or transmitters of knowledge, and students are deemed to be passive knowledge receptors, while in Australian classrooms, teachers tend to assume the roles of facilitators, providing scaffolding and support to their students. Learners are expected to be active participants, taking on a higher degree of responsibility for their own learning. Monica compared the teacher/learner roles in the two settings:

Excerpt 11

Teachers are highly respected in China, and considered to be authority figures. Students seldom challenge them in the classroom, and view their opinions as most accurate and reliable. Classrooms in China are always controlled by teachers...While in Australia, learners from different ethnic backgrounds are mobilized to participate in the classroom activities and freely voice their opinions. Teachers seldom give a specific answer to a question; they instead encourage brainstorming and discussions. You don’t feel that the classroom is dominated by the teacher, because their domination is invisible.

Pluto expressed similar opinions about teacher/learner roles in Australian classrooms:
Excerpt 12

Rather than instilling ideas into our minds, [Australian] teachers always teach us skills, join in our discussions, and assist us in resolving problems in groups...During the learning process, teachers provide guidance, but learners are required to show a higher degree of autonomy and self-exploration [than in China].

As Nelson and Quick (2000) have noted, both verbal and non-verbal communication styles of ELC teachers influenced how the participants evaluated and judged their roles in the two teaching environments.

When asked whether they preferred passively receiving knowledge or actively participating in classroom activities, participants’ responses varied. Six out of ten said that they enjoyed being active participants, while the remainder thought that the choice about whether to be an active participant or a passive recipient needs to be based on specific conditions.

Alicia reported that she was tired of rote learning and open to the participatory approach. She commented:

Excerpt 13

The passive learning style in China made me tired of studying; I often skipped classes at university. But here [in Australia], I’m highly motivated by the ability to participate in activities and explore issues individually.

Lily shared similar opinions:

Excerpt 14

I prefer the learner-centered approach because I’m not pushed to recite and learn.

Ying, who excelled in the foundation program at Macquarie University, appeared enthusiastic about active and autonomous learning. She stated:

Excerpt 15

I enjoy the self-exploration process a lot because I always have the desire to explore unknown fields of study. My enthusiasm for learning [in Australia] is stronger than ever. If I want to score a HD, I have to work harder and explore further.

Compared with passive learning, the majority of learners were more receptive to the learner-centered approach because it helped to arouse their interest and motivation to study. However,
individual factors such as English proficiency and independent learning skills affected these responses. It seemed that high achievers tended to prefer more autonomy.

A few participants had a particularly thought-provoking viewpoint. Pluto stated that the learner-centered approach should be implemented based on specific context, but was generally a good option:

Excerpt 16

I enjoy participating in group activities in Australian classrooms. However, this may be impossible in the big classrooms that are common in China. Chinese teachers are normally not trained in this area, and we are used to listening to the teacher passively. I think that this philosophy may need to be adapted to the Chinese context.

Given her Chinese educational and linguistic background, Monica was aware of Chinese students’ specific needs and characteristics. She commented:

Excerpt 17

Whether to choose to be an active participant or passive learner really depends. Everyone has different English levels, learning needs, and beliefs, so it’s very hard to seek unity in learning styles. I observed a classroom as a student-teacher in a language school in China and found that some students could speak English fluently, while others had to think about forming sentences, and struggled to produce meaning. At Macquarie, I once met a Muslim girl who was very quiet in class and never joined the group discussions. I asked her why this was, and she told me in her country, Muslim women were never allowed to have so much contact with people...It seems that not everyone can be an active participant in the classroom.

These concerns echo the findings of Hu (2005) and Rao (2002), who consider that the contextual factors and learners’ needs, as well as individual differences in proficiency, need to be taken into account, when applying a learner-centered approach.

Based on my overall observation, the majority of participants perceived and interpreted their role as classroom participants, rather than the “obedient passive listeners” described in most of the literature (Atkinson, 1997). Hu (2002) and Wang (2006), mention culturally rooted assumptions of the roles of Chinese learners, such as the expectation that due to the influence of Confucianism, they tend to passively receive knowledge. However, this tendency was not evident in the observations conducted in the present study.
4) **Teaching resources**

The results suggested that participants generally had favorable impressions about the teaching resources on offer at the ELC, such as the teaching materials and audio-visual facilities.

Lily stated that multi-media instruction such as videos greatly stimulated her emotional engagement in the classroom:

*Excerpt 18*

*Learning [at the ELC] is pleasurable from both the visual and auditory perspectives.*

Betty and Pluto thought the teaching materials and course content were very flexible:

*Excerpt 19*

*The teaching materials are very flexible. In addition to textbooks, supplementary teaching materials such as handouts are used. Rather than rigidly following the textbooks, students are encouraged to discuss and voice their opinions in the classroom. Textbooks are only used to assist instruction.* (Betty)

*Excerpt 20*

*Although textbooks are used, unlike in China, they are not viewed as flawless.* (Pluto)

This may reflect one of the features of contemporary English language teaching in China – textbooks are still considered an authoritative way of disseminating knowledge, and remain the centerpiece of classroom instruction (Atkinson, 1997).

Encouragingly, the participants showed favorable attitudes about the authenticity of teaching materials in Australia.

*Excerpt 21*

*The teaching materials are authentic, interesting, and relevant to our studies and lives overseas.* (Danna)

*Excerpt 22*

*The listening transcripts are authentic and help to improve my listening abilities.* (Cassy)

Richards (2005) has argued that authentic texts can be used to create interest and provide valid models of language. It seems that learners in the current study have derived both pleasure and
benefit from what they considered to be authentic teaching materials.

5) Teaching and learning activities

Based on their responses, the participants generally believed that there were differences between the teaching and learning activities conducted in China and Australia. Instructional activities in Chinese classrooms lean towards drills, grammatical knowledge, and exercises, while language teaching in Australia emphasizes the balance between four macro-skills, and focuses on the use of language, rather than its mere rules and forms. Additionally, language learning in China mainly relies on memorization and recitation, while there is more learner autonomy in Australia. Below are the excerpts of a few participants:

Excerpt 23

It was very boring to attend English classes in China because the instructional activities emphasized grammatical explanations and exercises. We were crammed with grammar rules and had to memorize and recite. (Alicia)

Excerpt 24

We were asked to memorize and recite new words and texts. I felt as if I was learning by rote. However, I didn’t know how to use grammar functionally. Although memorizing words quickly, I easily forgot them. (Lily)

Excerpt 25

In writing classes, we were required to imitate writing samples and recite useful expressions. Writing is a kind of creative task, but we were crammed with a lot of input, and seldom able to give any output. I felt bored and demotivated. (Betty)

As can be seen from these transcripts, the participants found traditional grammar instruction and rote-learning styles to be boring; they showed lower motivation and viewed this style as an ineffective way of achieving learning outcomes. The data also revealed a mismatch between the English curriculum goals and instructional practices in China. In spite of the vigorous promotion of CLT, only lip service was paid to its implementation, and it has not gained widespread support among English teachers in China (Hu, 2003).

In contrast with the mostly negative responses to the teaching and learning in China, the majority of participants showed favorable attitudes toward Australian teaching pedagogy.

For example, the participants held that they had greatly benefited from the comprehensive
training in their English skills at the ELC, especially speaking and academic writing, because these two skills were rarely developed in China. For example, Chan and Janice commented:

Excerpt 26

My overall English capabilities have improved. I have benefited a lot from the presentations and group discussions, as well as from writing. (Chan)

Excerpt 27

I feel that the communicative activities are very useful as my speaking and listening skills have improved significantly. (Janice)

6) Assessment

When asked to comment on the forms of assessment in use at the ELC, the participants considered that the tests they did were an all-round assessment of students’ English proficiency.

For example, Pluto and Danna said:

Excerpt 28

The assessments are not limited to written exams that focus on reading and writing; they also test listening and speaking. (Pluto)

Excerpt 29

The exams we take in China focus on grammar, reading, and writing more than speaking and listening. At the ELC, however all four macro-skills are given proper consideration and are assessed. (Danna)

When asked about their perceptions of the exam structure at the ELC, most participants viewed it as a useful way of comprehensively testing students’ English comprehensive competence, and in particular communication skills.

Excerpt 30

The exams aim to test students’ abilities to use language, rather than their mastery of grammatical knowledge. (Ying)

Excerpt 31

The oral tests vary in form and require a lot of practice. In China, I never had oral
As mentioned previously, there is a big mismatch between the curricular goals and exam structure in China (Li & Baldauf, 2011). Although recent curriculum developments have taken on board the learner-centered communicative philosophy, this is not reflected in the test structure, which presents a significant challenge in terms of shaping students’ beliefs (Li & Baldauf, 2011). Because speaking and listening are rarely tested in exams in China, teachers and learners devote very little attention to oral training and practice. However, in ESL contexts, learners are aware of the pressing need to improve their English-speaking skills. The participants in this study were supportive of oral tests, and viewed them as an essential part of assessing and evaluating one’s English communicative competence.

Surprisingly, Monica was very enthusiastic and excited about the oral exam, especially the preparation process:

*Excerpt 32*

*I like the one-minute speech and problem-solving task in the final exam. The one-minute speech requires you to think of a topic and articulate your ideas within a very limited time. It was a challenging task, and I felt like I was on a roller-coaster. However, when completing the speech, I had a sense of fulfilment. Another activity is to test how you solve a problem in an oral conversation with a partner. Because we had no idea about who our partner would be in the exam, we had to practice speaking with different classmates, whether we were familiar with them or not, discuss the issues, and explore the best solutions. I was very excited about the process of cooperating with different partners. I think that this trains me how to solve problems step by step.*

Clearly, this participant was very positive about the oral exams she took, and viewed the preparation process as a way to develop her teamwork and problem-solving skills.

7) **Connections between the two learning experiences**

The participants generally stated that their prior learning experiences both facilitated and impeded their language learning in Australia. In terms of facilitation, most thought that the grammatical knowledge and vocabulary acquired in China were very helpful for their current studies in Australia. Thanks to such repetitive drills and recitation, they accumulated many new words, and grasped new grammar concepts. Below are the comments of three participants:

*Excerpt 33*
I think that my prior learning experiences in China facilitated my English language learning in Australia. I have accumulated a large number of words and phrases through drills and recitations, which is very helpful for my ability to make English expressions. Furthermore, I have learned many grammar rules, which will be useful for my academic writing. (Janice)

Excerpt 34

I learned a lot of grammar and vocabulary in China, which is very useful for reading comprehension. I believe that if reading a lot, I’ll gradually improve my writing. To some extent, the grammatical knowledge has laid a solid foundation for my further study in Australia. (Ying)

Excerpt 35

Although learning by rote, such as recitation of words and phrases, has some negative impacts on my studies, it has enabled me to accumulate plenty of new words. The grammar rules, words, and phrases I learned in my mother tongue have strengthened my understanding about word usage and abstract grammatical knowledge. (Lily)

As can be seen from the data, the participants generally recognized the benefits of their prior learning experiences, and considered that the vocabulary and grammar acquired in China was an important step in building their knowledge and developing their abilities. This corresponds with the observations of Biggs (1996) and Pratt et al. (1999), that Chinese learners view it necessary to master the fundamental knowledge first, before developing other skills and exploring creativity.

The participants also acknowledged the GTM (encompassing drills and explanation in students’ first language) as an effective approach to learning grammar, although they felt bored with the abstract grammar rules and theoretical knowledge. The results may confirm Cunningham’s (2000) claim, that translation plays an important role in students’ acquisition of a second language.

Additionally, the participants regarded memorization and recitation as a useful strategy to accumulate words and study grammar rules, although they revealed negative attitudes toward the rote-learning style. Chan (1999) contends that memorization should not be equated with rote learning style. Ho et al. (1999) also maintain that memorization based on understanding is an effective learning approach. It could be argued that memorization and understanding were intertwined through their learning to achieve better results.
Interestingly, Betty said that her prior learning experiences in China were very useful for dealing with various exams:

*Excerpt 36*

*Although language instruction in China is exam-oriented and grammar-focused, this helps students to approach exams and achieve their purposes such as university entrance exams, IELTS tests, and SAT tests.*

Parris-Kidd (2011) contends that the ways in which knowledge is tested and success is measured vary depending on the particular culture of learning. The data in the current study seems to imply that the participants’ perceptions have to some extent been shaped by the Chinese learning culture, which is characterized by a results-driven educational system.

In terms of the negative influence of their prior learning experiences, participants mostly attributed their comparatively weak communication skills to the unequal balance between the four-macro skills of languages and the form-based classroom activities and exams. Below are some excerpts extracted from the participants’ transcripts:

*Excerpt 37*

*Because speaking, listening, and writing are not given proper consideration [in China], both my oral and written communication skills are comparatively weak and need to be improved. (Betty)*

*Excerpt 38*

*Grammar is heavily emphasized in Chinese classes and exams, so I initially paid great attention to form and accuracy, when speaking in the class. This has undoubtedly influenced my level of fluency. (Monica)*

**4.2.1.2 Attitudes toward CLT**

1) **Expectations about classroom activities**

The results indicated that nine out of the ten participants, before embarking on their studies, expected to engage in more communicative and interactive activities in Australian classrooms, due to the various constraints they had faced in their home country.

Below are the excerpts extracted from the transcripts:

*Excerpt 39*
I expected more communicative activities in Australian classes, such as group discussions and presentations, to improve my communicative competence; I received very limited training in these areas in China. (Betty)

Excerpt 40

I expected group activities that would develop my teamwork skills. I also expected more interaction between teachers and students. (Ying)

Excerpt 41

I expected to take part in group activities to improve my independent-thinking skills and other capabilities. (Danna)

Excerpt 42

I expected a less rigid learning environment where students could join group discussions and express opinions... I also expected that I wouldn't have to learn as many grammar rules as in China, and that grammar would be explained and used in a flexible and functional way. (Pluto)

The data showed that the participants reported a general wish to develop their communication and cooperation skills, as well as their ability to think independently by participating in communicative activities. Additionally, they expected that grammar teaching would be focused more on meaning and function, rather than form and rules.

2) Attitudes toward communicative activities

When asked about the activities that they preferred and deemed most useful at the ELC, all of the participants mentioned communicative activities, such as group discussions, oral presentations, and excursions, because these activities helped them to improve communicative competence and problem-solving skills, become acquainted with foreign accents and cultures, and clarify the areas of confusion. The excerpts below reveal such feelings and views:

Excerpt 43

I like to take short excursions as they provided me with opportunities to explore local history and culture, as well as communicate widely with local people. (Ying)

Excerpt 44

I prefer group discussions because they are aimed at improving comprehension abilities.
They teach me how to carry out research, work with others, and express my ideas more confidently. (Pluto)

The participants evidently did not have an easy journey, as they learned to communicate with others in English. However, they reported gaining a great deal of useful experience:

**Excerpt 45**

*I think the process of communicating with others is a path on which I need to continuously move forward. To speak English well, I had to overcome shyness and compel myself to speak out and interact with others. During this process, I may not have always been able to get the message across to those I was interacting with, but I didn’t lose heart. Instead, I actively took part in conversations, and tried to make my language more fluent and accurate. I gradually built up confidence and started to speak well. I think the key here is to encourage yourself, and not be afraid of making mistakes.*

(Danna)

**Excerpt 46**

*I think that to make communication more effective, one needs to overcome shyness and build confidence. At the beginning, you may feel it is hard to go beyond that, but when you taste its sweetness, you’ll become more confident, and just want to go for it.*

(Ying)

Zhong (2013), in her qualitative study, reports that some socio-cultural factors, such as students’ reluctance to lose face, contribute to their degree of classroom participation. Based on my observations, some participants initially might be concerned about losing face and being judged negatively by their peers and teachers. However, when discovering the benefits associated with participating, they dismissed those negative ideas, and became more confident and enthusiastic about oral communication. This is supportive of Plumb’s (2008) findings, that communicative activities play an important role in developing learners’ oral abilities and building their self-confidence.

A few learners voiced the opinion that the group activities provided them with opportunities to talk with people from other cultural backgrounds, through which they could practice using English and familiarize themselves with foreign accents and cultures. For example, Chan and Betty commented:

**Excerpt 47**

*I enjoy group discussions as they provide opportunities to talk with everyone.*
way, I have gotten to know some non-Chinese students in our class, and learned about their cultures and languages. It’s very boring to only talk to Chinese. I wish I could enlarge my social circle, and see more non-Chinese students in our class. (Chan)

Excerpt 48

I find group discussions to be very useful. In this activity, we change seats almost every day, and thus have many opportunities to talk with classmates from different cultural backgrounds, such as Japanese and Indian people, hear various accents, and avoid always speaking Chinese. (Betty)

As shown above, learners were mostly keen to interact with non-Chinese students in collaborative learning.

While appreciating the benefits gained from communicative activities, two participants questioned the effectiveness of the group discussions. Alicia seemingly view things with a critical eye. She tended to evaluate group work more negatively, identifying drawbacks such as digressions in discussions, uncooperative partners, and people using their mother tongue to express ideas, although she acknowledged that she did reap some direct benefit from it.

Excerpt 49

The group discussions have clarified my confusion. However, we can easily go off topic as the majority of my classmates are Chinese. Due to limited vocabulary, we sometimes didn’t know how to express ideas in English, and had to resort to using our mother tongue. Therefore, I don’t feel that the group discussions work so efficiently. (Alicia)

Danna also raised similar concerns, although she was positive about the group work as a whole. She believed that a system should be established to ensure the effectiveness of group discussions:

Excerpt 50

Group discussions need to operate in such a way that everyone does their fair share, and contributes to the topic and discussion. If one person is selected to do the group presentation, others may passively join in the activity. Sometimes, group members go off topic, and discuss irrelevant issues in Chinese.

These concerns indicated that not all of the participants held uniform views about collaborative work.
During her interview, Alicia appeared more concerned about the end product of an activity. In her opinion, there must be a purpose and a result to justify undertaking any tasks, and if no improvement is made, it can be a waste of time. She commented:

*Excerpt 51*

> Frankly, the sharing and discussions did help me to clarify confusions ... However, they don’t always work efficiently. Sometimes, they’re time-consuming and end up with no solutions... I think that most of my partners are cooperative, but a few are not willing to work together, so I have to work alone.

Apparently, Alicia is a results-driven person, who tends to focus more on the results to be gained from these activities than seeing them as an opportunity for language use. However, the process of negotiating and interacting with peers is very important for learning (Zhong, 2013). According to Nelson and Quick (2000), perceivers’ characteristics, such as their attitudes and mood state (i.e. whether they are in a positive or negative mood) and cognitive structure (i.e. an individual’s pattern of thinking), shape the way they perceive things. Alicia’s negative mood and beliefs about group discussions may have affected how she perceived them. It could be argued that such a perception is to some degree influenced by the Chinese learning culture, which is dominated by a results-driven educational system.

### 4.2.1.3 Attitudes toward grammar activities

The data suggested that the participants revealed diverging beliefs about grammar activities. Six showed favorable attitudes toward the grammar instruction they received at the ELC; two expressed less interest, but acknowledged that it was an integral part of learning English; while the remaining two students simply found it boring.

The excerpts below outline the participants’ feelings and views:

1) **A preference for grammar learning through games:**

*Excerpt 52*

> I enjoy learning grammar by playing games, which I find to be an effective way of memorizing new words and learning grammar rules. In China, I basically relied on rote-learning to memorize words. (Lily)

Apparently, games, to some extent, have resulted in improved efficacy in Lily’s vocabulary
acquisition. She has drawn much benefit from them.

Excerpt 53

I enjoy learning grammar through games. Compared with boring grammar exercises, it has greatly boosted my enthusiasm and motivation...I also enjoy working with partners when revising grammar. I find it to be more interesting and effective than working individually. (Ying)

Ying’s response revealed her belief that grammar instruction in communicative activities not only helped her to learn more efficiently, but also aroused her motivation and interest.

It seems that an integration of FFI and communicative activities has a greater effect on teaching and learning outcomes than grammar instruction in isolation. These findings are consistent with the results reported by Imai’s (2007), that learners show a preference for integrated FFI.

2) A preference for grammar learning in other modalities:

Some participants stated that grammar instruction in combination with writing constituted an effective approach to relate grammatical knowledge to academic writing. In this way, they learned how to write more argumentatively and persuasively. For example, Pluto commented:

Excerpt 54

Rather than explanations of forms and rules, knowledge was taught in combination with writing, such as how to use modality and conjunctions in essays. It’s easy to follow and very useful!

Excerpt 55

I prefer grammar to be taught together with writing, because in this way I learned how to use conjunctions properly to make sentences more coherent, and how to use objective words and formal language to make writing more academic. (Cassy)

The results suggested that integrating grammar instruction with writing is likely to assist learners in absorbing theoretical knowledge and using grammar concepts more easily. Hence, the participants’ positive attitudes echo Imai’s (2007) findings, that learners are favorable about grammar instruction via different modalities.

3) Less interest in learning grammar

Two participants were less interested in grammatical knowledge, but acknowledged its
importance in language study.

Excerpt 56

Although grammar is a bit boring, compared with communicative activities, it’s an integral part of studying English. Without a good command of grammar concepts, I would be unable to listen, speak, read, or write. (Janice)

Excerpt 57

Compared with communicative activities, I have less interest in grammar. However, it’s necessary to learn it; after all, grammar is the foundation of communication. Without a good grasp of knowledge, I can’t communicate effectively. Anyway, I’m motivated to learn grammar here [in Australia]. (Cassy)

This neutral attitude revealed that, although these few participants had less motivation to study grammar, they recognized its great value and importance.

4) A lack of interest in learning grammar

Two participants said that they disliked grammar due to its theoretical principles and individual learning difficulties.

Excerpt 58

I don’t like grammar exercises because they’re very boring. I’m also very bad at them. (Chan)

Excerpt 59

I don’t like grammar rules because they’re very theoretical and difficult to grasp… To write an essay well, one needs a lot of grammatical knowledge. It’s really a big challenge for me. (Betty)

These two participants’ comments indicated that their personal feelings toward grammar were dictated by their grammatical knowledge, academic performance, and personal preferences for studying grammar. It seems that individual factors related to English proficiency play an important role in determining learners’ attitudes to grammar.

4.2.1.4 Discussion of the findings

In general, by reflecting on their previous and current learning experiences, the participants
appeared well aware of the contrast between EFL and ESL contexts, and gradually established their views and perceptions of the host learning culture. Their responses demonstrated that they were willing to be active classroom participants (as shown in Excerpts 15, 46, and 47) and take on a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning (Excerpt 16). This is in line with Littlewood’s (2000) findings, that the stereotype of Asian students as “obedient listeners” by no means reflects the roles they would like to adopt in class. In addition, their dislike of traditional grammar instruction (Excerpts 14, 24, 25, and 26) and expectations (Excerpts 40, 41, 42, and 43) and appreciation of communicative activities (Excerpts 44, 45, 48, and 49) suggest that they showed a greater preference for communicative approach. It seems that the learners’ primary concern was to improve their communicative competence so as to further their education and survive in an English-speaking country. These findings correspond with Saito and Ebsworth (2004), who discovered that ESL learners showed a particular interest in and motivation toward Western learning styles. Generally, as increasingly identifying with the host culture, the participants tended to embrace its cultural values and the teaching philosophies embedded in the local context, and tried to be responsive to the demands and requirements of the program in the new academic environment. This reflects Kumar’s (2000) argument that individuals have the potential to be flexible and receptive to new ideas and values and to transcend linguistic boundaries.

Despite these positive attitudes about communicative activities in ESL learning experiences, a few participants noted the limitations of group work, such as digressions in discussions, uncooperative partners, and differences in individual needs and language proficiencies. As learners move from passive learning to active participation, they may show diverging views about collaborative work, and fail to adapt to it. It is therefore necessary to justify the use of group work in learning a language, and to establish a mechanism to ensure its effectiveness to the utmost. Additionally, considering learners’ needs and individual differences, it may be beneficial to gradually implement communicative activities step by step.

Although the participants did not value grammatical knowledge as much as communicative activities, they generally acknowledged its benefits for their current learning (Excerpts 34, 35 and 36) because it had helped them to build up solid background knowledge. Research indicates that understanding grammar can facilitate the process of language acquisition (Zheng, 2015). Kong (2011) states that the mastery of grammar rules is a prerequisite for successful communication. The importance of grammar is demonstrated in skill acquisition theory: adults commence learning from explicit processes and with subsequent practice, move on to implicit processes. Through this transition, previously obtained declarative knowledge is automatized and transformed into procedural knowledge (Anderson, 1993). If grammar teaching is for the
acquisition of declarative knowledge, CLT may encourage learners to apply their previously acquired grammatical knowledge to the actual communication. Through consistent practice, knowledge of grammar is transformed into procedural knowledge for the purposes of negotiating meaning and exchanging information.

However, how to transform declarative knowledge of grammar and reinforce its communicative function has been a challenging task for SLA researchers. Brown (2000) suggests that grammar should be presented through authentic tasks within meaningful and communicative contexts. Canale and Swain (1980) propose that grammar rules should be integrated into meaningful activities to enhance their functionality and achieve an optimal balance between functional and grammatical organization. In an experimental study conducted among Chinese ESL students, Zeng (2004) proved that grammar instruction within CLT can serve as a link to enable meaningful communication, and this approach was strongly supported by L2 learners. A similar trend is also evident in the current study. The transcripts show that participants generally had a preference for grammar instruction embedded in communicative practice (such as games, peer revisions, and the integration of grammar and academic writing), and considered it an effective way to realize language function and enhance learning motivation (Excerpts 53, 54, 55, and 56). Those who lacked an interest in grammar were possibly not aware of its connections with communicative activities. The findings also suggest that grammatical competence and communicative competence are equally important; communicative competence is underpinned by grammatical competence that enables users to communicate messages. Therefore, both should be evenly highlighted in language teaching and learning.

Broadly speaking, as reflected in the data, learning cultures and contextual factors significantly influence English instructional practices, and shape people’s perceptions and socio-cultural values. However, with increasing acculturation, the students in this study came to embrace the cultural norms and values of the local contexts, and gradually developed their understanding of Australian culture, both socially and academically. In contrast to EFL learners, they showed highly positive attitudes toward communicative activities, and mostly preferred grammar instruction to be conducted within communicative contexts. Hence, a holistic approach, developmental perspective, and culturally sensitive stance may be needed to understand students’ dynamic changes of perceptions, as well as their prior learning and literacy experiences.
4.3 Research question 2: What are Chinese learners’ perceived English learning difficulties in Australia?

Although the participants believed that the English training program was beneficial, many of them considered it very challenging. Consistent with previous studies (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Lee, Farruggia & Brown, 2013; Park, et al., 2017; Robertson et al., 2000; Zhang & Mi, 2010), the issues raised mainly related to academic writing, grammar use in the context, oral communication, understanding the Australian accent, and autonomy. Writing was seemingly the most difficult task. Nine participants criticized their own limited English proficiency and written language skills. Speaking and listening were considered less difficult, being mentioned six and four times, respectively, in the responses. Reading seemed to be the least challenging of the four linguistic macro-skills. Only one student raised issues with reading. The results are congruent with Zhang and Mi (2010), who identified that reading does not seem to be a major issue for L2 Chinese learners, but writing does. Below are the major findings, supported by an analysis of the interview transcripts.

4.3.1 Difficulties in academic writing

Coming from a culture that has different discourse patterns, the participants generally found it challenging to learn Australian discourse conventions. Most reported limited writing skills and knowledge about how to vary the use of language according to the register (e.g. formal and informal language).

For example, Lily and Ying said that they often failed to distinguish between formal and informal language, and sometimes used the two registers inappropriately.

Excerpt 60

As words and phrases are explained in the abstract, I don’t know how to use them properly in academic writing, such as conjunctions and modal auxiliary verbs. I get confused about in what circumstances formal and informal language should be used... I have difficulty in differentiating subjective words from objective ones, and I’m unclear about how to avoid subjectivity in my writing. (Lily)

Excerpt 61

In China, I was asked to recite fancy words and imitate writing samples, so I came to like using superior words in writing to show off my level of English, and never considered whether they were appropriate in the context. However, it seems not to work
here [in Australia] because we need to paraphrase sentences and provide references. 

Initially, I found it quite hard. (Ying)

These two participants’ responses indicate that grammar is still taught in isolation in China, rather than with reference to communicative tasks. Students might be trained to master the rules of sentence formation, but they seem incapable of using this knowledge for meaningful written communication.

Ying’s comment suggests that her confusion about cultural differences come from the fact that the Western cultural tradition stresses originality and creativity, while the Chinese learning culture promotes imitative cultural practices (Pennycook, 1996). Pennycook (1996) argues that, when considering the notion of textual ownership, it is very important to understand the ownership of text, memory and learning practices in a specific cultural context, in particular “when cultural traditions regarding text, ownership and memorization collide with each other” (P. 217). Apparently, cultural differences in perceiving relationships to text, memory, and language learning present a significant challenge for learners’ adaptation, both culturally and academically.

Pluto majored in traditional Chinese dramatic literature at a university in China. She voiced an original view regarding writing:

Excerpt 62

The Chinese language emphasizes semantic connections, while English focuses on syntactic devices. When writing in English, I can feel that my thinking and expressions are influenced by my first language.

Clearly, cross-linguistic influences reflected in the differences in textual syntax and style is another major concern for L2 Chinese students.

4.3.2 Difficulties in communication

Because ELT in China focuses on grammar and academic literacy skills, the participants generally reported that their communicative competence was weak and inadequate, in particular their speaking and listening skills. They tended to attach importance to word form and accuracy, rather than its meaning and fluency.

For example, Monica commented:
Initially, I paid great attention to word form and accuracy [when speaking English]. This undoubtedly slowed down my speech and limited its fluency.

Ying reported that she had difficulty in understanding Australian accents.

When talking with locals, I could hardly follow them if they speak quickly.

Having been exposed to American English for many years in China, the participants are possibly unfamiliar with Australian slang and accents. The results are consistent with Robertson et al. (2000) and Khawaja and Stallman (2011), who report that understanding Australian accents is a major issue for international students. Conceivably, such difficulties may influence their overall study experience and social life in the host nation.

Janice noted that her lack of knowledge about the cultural background of Australia hindered her comprehension and interpretation:

Due to my insufficient knowledge of foreign cultural backgrounds, I found it difficult to understand the discourse in conversations and movies.

Chan struggled with oral presentations:

I’m not confident at making presentations in class; I feel nervous, and don’t know how to use my body language to appeal to my classmates. My presentation scores were therefore very low.

Being in a transition from passive to active classroom cultures, it is likely that some respondents were not able to become habituated to Western dialogical practices in classrooms. This confirms the findings of Robertson et al. (2000), that fear of public speaking is a key impediment to international students’ success in their academic studies.

4.3.3 Difficulties with independent learning
Influenced by the didactic and teacher-centered approach, the participants generally found it challenging to independently seek knowledge and search for information in Australia, where originality and creativity are highly encouraged in learning contexts. Some of these difficulties related to the transition from a passive recipient to an active and autonomous learner.

For example, Betty and Ying commented:

*Excerpt 67*

In Australia, we don’t just reproduce what we have learned, but have to explore knowledge on our own. To complete an assignment, we need to engage in reading and researching. As I have been used to being spoon-fed, it takes some time and effort to change and improve. (Betty)

*Excerpt 68*

At my high school in China, teachers were very strict, and I was pushed to do assignments, while in Australia, learner autonomy is highly valued. Although teachers assign tasks, some of them are not necessarily to be handed in, such as tasks related to reading and researching, so we have to take the initiative to study. However, I’m still used to the old learning style, and lack a positive attitude. It may take some time to adapt myself to the Australian learning environment. (Ying)

Ying’s comments reflected part of the learners’ current learning state. Although aware of the gap, and desiring to change their learning habits, they still found it difficult to go beyond their “comfort zone”.

4.3.4 Discussion of the findings

The results revealed that participants’ learning difficulties mainly fell in the areas of academic writing (Excerpts 60, 61, and 62), oral communication (Excerpts 63, 64, 65, and 66), grammar use (Excerpts 60 and 61), cultural differences (Excerpts 62 and 65), and autonomous learning (Excerpts 67 and 68). Of these issues, writing and communication were particularly common in the responses. The results support those of Sawir (2005) and Robertson et al. (2000), that writing and speaking are the biggest concerns facing international students.

No one is a “blank slate” on their first day when starting a new course. All learners may be affected by what they have been taught or learned before (Sawir, 2005). As reflected in the data, issues with grammar use, fear of public speaking, and difficulties with assignments are partly
related to the participants’ prior teaching and learning styles. In the exam-oriented educational system in China, classroom instruction leans toward language knowledge (i.e. vocabulary and grammar) rather than an integration of all language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). As a result, students’ language learning experience is largely confined to the two skills that form the “written channel” -- reading (textbook passages and exercises) and writing (grammatical exercises) (Zhang & Mi, 2010). Despite having good knowledge of grammar rules and principles, they may lack the competence to use language for meaningful communication; being accustomed to the traditional didactic and teacher-centered approach, it is likely that learners may experience difficulties in the transition from a passive style of learning (non-Western) to an active classroom culture (Western). These results confirm the research findings of Sawir (2005), Wong (2004), and Hellsten (2002), who all found that international students’ passivity in classroom activities can be partly attributed to their prior teaching and learning styles.

In addition to the impact of prior learning experiences, cultural differences in writing pose another difficulty to Chinese international students; the originality and creativity stressed in the Western tradition may collide with the imitative cultural practices valued in the Chinese context. How to quickly adapt oneself to new cultural norms and discourse conventions is, undoubtedly, a big challenge faced by L2 learners. Research into ESL writing has found that there are marked differences between cultures in terms of rhetorical conventions, cultural schemata, and writing perspectives or expectations (Hyland, 2003). Therefore, to improve one’s L2 literacy skills is a daunting task, and may take years of training to develop.

Generally, the participants indicated that they were aware of the problems they had experienced, and of the skills that were crucial for academic success. The impact of prior learning experiences, coupled with cultural differences and language limitations, were seen as partly contributing to their difficulties in learning. Biggs (1997) argues that identifying problems is insufficient; it is important to move beyond problems and gaps to seek strategies that can be adopted by students. In a sense, identifying the underlying causes of problems will shed light on the development of strategies aimed at improved teaching and learning outcomes. As Robertson et al. (2000, p. 101) suggest, international students are “part of the community of learners within the university”. Both students and staff need to work together to develop “an appropriate teaching and learning environment which is context related, inclusive of and accepting of intercultural difference” (Robertson et al., 2000, p. 101).
4.4 Research question 3: What are the major characteristics of English language teaching at the English Language Center (ELC) of Macquarie University?

I completed a period of classroom observations to gain a better understanding of the instructional activities and teaching methodologies on offer at the ELC. A total of five English course sessions were observed. Table 3 provides general information about these five sessions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class name</th>
<th>Time (mins)</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Main themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A4-12 (Intermediate)</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>Ms. Peck</td>
<td>Leading a seminar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4-4 (Intermediate)</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>Ms. Whitfield</td>
<td>Energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G 4.2a (Pre-intermediate)</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>Ms. Bishop</td>
<td>Be a guest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAE 3 (Upper-intermediate)</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>Mr. Park</td>
<td>Academic writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G 4.1a (Pre-intermediate)</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>Ms. Smith</td>
<td>Second life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Pseudonyms are used for teachers’ names.

Based on my observations, the ELC encourages small classes, with a maximum of 18 students in each. Unlike the traditional seating arrangement in a classroom of rows of desks, the tables and chairs are conjoined and moveable, which creates an interactive and cooperative learning environment. Classroom activities are generally communication-oriented and learner-centered, and comply with the major features of CLT, as described by Richards (2005). The major characteristics of the English lessons are outlined below; the observation charts relating to the relevant classes (G4.1a, G4.2a, and BAE 3) can be found in Appendix 2.
4.4.1 Skill integration and the learner-centered approach

During the classroom observations, I noted that the teaching activities generally emphasize the integration of four macro-skills and aim to develop students’ communicative competence and learning autonomy. For example, in class G4.1a, before a listening task, students were first asked to discuss what they could do in second life (a computer game). This was followed by extensive and intensive listening activities for detailed comprehension and text interpretation. Simultaneously, they were given opportunities to share what they had heard and discuss questions in groups. These activities also provided a stimulus for them to write and create their own avatars. As such, receptive skills and productive skills were combined to provide them with maximum learning opportunities.

Another activity, the “Book Club Café”, also involved skill integration. According to Ms. Smith, this activity was normally arranged every Friday afternoon to develop students’ comprehension capabilities. In the three classes (i.e. G4.1a, G4.2a and BAE 3), I noted that with background music playing, in groups, students enthusiastically shared new words and reflected on what had been read out of class. They were free to drink coffee or eat biscuits when chatting, while the teachers went to each group, facilitating learning and giving feedback. Based on the observation charts, this group work took up about 33% of class BAE 3 (38 of 115 minutes) and 29% of class G4.1a (35 of 120 minutes). Obviously, the classes were not predominantly directed by teachers. Rather, this activity took the form of the learner-centered approach, and was intended to promote communicative competence. This task also enabled students to develop various skills - not only listening and speaking, but also reading and critical thinking. During group discussions, I occasionally heard some Chinese being spoken. Some teachers told the students “please speak English!”, while Ms. Bishop was very open to the use of L1. She encouraged students to try to speak in English, but did not object to their use of mother tongue if they found it difficult to communicate ideas in English. The use of L1 in the L2 classroom has both advantages and disadvantages. Harmer (2015) has suggested that teachers and students should negotiate clear guidelines regarding L1 use in the L2 classrooms. The participants also brought up this issue during individual interviews (see Excerpts 49 and 50). It seems that negotiated guidelines would make learners more aware of when use of the mother tongue is productive and when it is not.
4.4.2 Grammar instruction in the CLT

In terms of grammar instruction, I noted that higher-level students, such as those in academic and BAE classes, were required to do fewer grammar activities; while for lower-level students such as those in the general class, a balance between implicit and explicit grammar instruction was emphasized. However, explicit grammar instruction only formed a small part of the class. In class G4.2a, for example, knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, together with drills, accounted for less than 30% of the whole class (30 of 110 minutes). Based on my past teaching and learning experiences in China, this is much less than the time spent on explicit grammar instructions in most Chinese classrooms. Furthermore, rather than being taught in isolation, grammar arose out of communicative tasks and was linked to other modalities to engage learners for meaningful purposes. For example, in the writing class (Class BAE 3), Mr. Park did not simply follow the content of the textbook. Rather, he utilized parts of students’ writing assignments to explain how to write academically. He first asked learners to discuss and revise their writings in pairs, and then proceeded to provide explanations as to how to link sentences and paragraphs together by using relative clauses, proper tenses, and linking devices. Students were highly motivated and enthusiastic when going through each other’s mistakes in groups. They showed favorable attitudes toward grammar instruction via writing tasks. These observations accord with participants’ reported beliefs during the interviews (e.g. Excerpt 53), and confirm the findings of previous studies (Imai, 2007; Gonzales-Bueno & Perez, 2000).

Celce-Murcia and Hills (1988) have suggested that grammar should never be taught as an end in itself, but always with reference to meaning, social factors, discourse, or a combination of these factors, which are the true purposes of grammar. Furthermore, Garrett (1986) proposes that the teaching of grammar rules to facilitate expression in communication can develop students’ communicative competence. In the class I observed, grammar was taught as a tool to be used in the creation of written discourse, rather than something to be learned as an end in itself. The teaching activities were focused on the functional use of language and communicative competence, and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence (Brown, 2000).

4.4.3 Language teaching in authentic and meaningful contexts

In the classroom observations, I noted that the textbooks were designed as real-world sources such as magazines; the topics in the texts were up-to-date and relevant to the students’ lives and interests (e.g. avatar and energy). Teachers mostly used these textbooks for their lessons.
However, depending on the topics, they sometimes altered the content to tailor it to the students’ needs. In addition, language teaching was conducted in authentic and meaningful contexts, and intended to achieve real-world goals and realize pragmatic and functional purposes. For instance, in the lesson talking about being a guest, Ms. Bishop made a change to the coursebook content by adding a role-play exercise for language practice. She first demonstrated how to use the phrase “What can I get you please?”, and then asked learners to act out the scene in pairs, assuming the roles of host and guest. Meanwhile, the students were encouraged to use drinks and food that they had sketched on the wall to role play the conversation. The classroom was full of fun and laughter; everyone was imbued with high spirits and motivations, and even the shy students became more courageous. While the students were carrying out the task, Ms. Bishop monitored the class from a distance, and occasionally corrected their pronunciation or grammar mistakes to make sure their fluency and accuracy were developed. According to the observation chart, this activity formed a large part of the class, accounting for over 30% (35 of 110 minutes) of the total time.

Richards (2005, p. 21) has written that “classroom activities should mirror the real world”. Apparently, language teaching in this class was conducted in an authentic and meaningful context, and intended as a preparation for survival in the real world. In a sense, it is likely to help learners personalize their studies by applying what has been learned to their own lives (Richards, 2005).

4.4.4 Discussion of the findings

The findings extracted from classroom observations revealed that language teaching in the ELC is generally communication-oriented; the teaching activities emphasize skills integration and combination of receptive skills and productive skills (e.g. class G4.1a). Contrary to the traditional approaches that emphasize grammatical patterns and practices, the classroom instruction encourages meaningful and authentic activities, such as group work, pair work, and role play (e.g. class G4.2a) to create a need for communication and interaction. Rather than the teacher-centered approach, a participatory approach is promoted, whereby students are required to autonomously participate in cooperative activities, and teachers provide scaffolding and support (e.g. classes G 4.1a, G 4.2a, and BAE 3).

In addition, the teaching activities tend to develop students’ communication skills by linking grammatical competence to the ability to communicate (e.g. class BAE 3). In a sense, grammar was not taught in isolation as an end in itself. Rather, it was linked to other modalities embedded
in communicative activities, and closely related to meanings and functions.

Broadly speaking, the teaching pedagogy at the ELC mainly follows the communicative approach and practice, while to some extent making reference to traditional approaches.
5 Chapter 5: Conclusions, implications, and limitations

5.1 Introduction

In this concluding chapter, a summary of the study is first presented, followed by an outline of the implications for English language teaching and learning in Australia, the students’ host country, and China, their home country. Finally, the limitations and possible directions for future research will be discussed.

5.2 Summary of the study

This study has followed a qualitative case study approach to examine how Chinese ESL learners perceive ELT in the Australian context and the learning difficulties they have encountered in their English studies. To this end, I have made use of various forms of data collection - qualitative interviews with participants and classroom observations - to examine teaching and learning phenomena from multiple perspectives. This was done to enable triangulation of the data and to enhance the validity of the findings.

The study investigated three questions. Question 1 relates to Chinese learners’ perceptions of ELT in Australia and is intended to help L2 instructors to plan appropriate classes geared to learners’ needs. By interviewing ten participants who were previously or are currently enrolled in the English program at Macquarie University, I found that with increasing familiarity with Western teaching contexts, participants gradually became able to follow the rules of mainstream culture and became receptive to the cultural values and teaching philosophies of their new academic environment. Being aware of the pressing need to survive in an English-speaking country, they showed highly positive attitudes about CLT, and mostly favored grammar instruction within communicative practice.

Question 2 concerns students’ learning difficulties, and is aimed at helping learners to increase their awareness of desirable learning strategies. According to the findings, the participants touched mostly on challenges related to academic writing, grammar use, communication skills, cultural differences, and autonomous learning. To some extent, their learning difficulties were affected by the prior teaching and learning styles to which they had been exposed, as well as cultural differences.

Question 3 is designed to understand the characteristics of instructional activities, and I observed five English sessions in the ELC. According to my observations, the language teaching at the ELC emphasizes skill integration, and is communication-oriented and learner-
centered. The observations generally correspond with the learners’ reflections during their interviews.

Generally speaking, this study has sought to respond to a research gap in the literature by examining what Chinese ESL learners feel about Western pedagogy, and how their perceptions change, as a result of learning experiences and teaching contexts. The research findings would have significant implications for English language teaching and learning in students’ host and home countries.

5.3 Implications and recommendations

The implications of the participants’ perceptions and learning difficulties are presented in this subsection.

5.3.1 Pedagogical implications in terms of learners’ perceptions

1) Combining communicative activities and grammar instruction

The results of this study indicate that ESL learners have highly positive attitudes toward communicative activities, and mostly favor the integration of grammar instruction within communicative practice. In view of this, it is very important to combine both implicit and explicit grammar instructions in language teaching and learning. This would equally develop learners’ communicative and grammatical competence, as well as sustain their interest and motivation. In addition, feedback from learners would enable course designers and curriculum developers to constantly revise and update their programs to adapt to learners’ needs.

2) Context-sensitivity and negotiating with a new culture

The research findings also indicate that particular cultures of learning and contextual factors to some extent shape people’s perceptions and socio-cultural values. Being in a transitional and rebirth process from passive learning to active participation, some of the participants possibly have views that are incongruous with the host teachers’ methodological beliefs, such as the value of the participatory approach and group work. Kumaravadivelu (1991) contends that if teachers are more aware of learners’ approaches to language learning and knowledgeable of their past learning experiences, they would engage in more effective interventions and facilitate the desired learning outcomes. For this reason, it is suggested that teachers should perform some “context analysis” before starting to teach so that they are better positioned to decide how
to proceed and develop their own approach. During pedagogical practice, they may need to identify learners’ expectations, hear and respect their voices, and reflect on what happens at each stage. Once being aware of learners’ perceptions, teachers could unite their ideas and encourage learners to become more actively involved in classroom activities.

Apart from that, considering learners’ needs and individual differences, as Parris-Kidd and Barnett (2011) suggest, negotiation between teachers and students regarding a possible solution, such as developing a new culture of learning is needed. This would bridge the gap between methodological beliefs and students’ preferences and enable two opposing opinions to be accommodated. Cortazzi and Jin (1996, p. 317) term this coadaptation “cultural synergy”, and propose that both teachers and students should work together coherently and “learn about each other’s values, conceptions and experiences of teaching and learning”. This would not only develop students’ awareness of learning across cultures, but also facilitate intercultural communication.

5.3.2 Implications in terms of Chinese students’ learning difficulties

The research findings indicate that participants’ learning difficulties mainly fall in the areas of communication, grammar use and autonomy. To some degree, these difficulties are partly influenced by their prior exposure to traditional teaching methods and learning styles. Hence, it could be argued that necessary interventions should be considered in their home country (China) as well as the country where they are currently studying (Australia).

First, given the situational constraints in mainland China, as proposed by recent studies, a hybrid model, such as blending CLT with traditional Chinese approaches, is highly recommended in Chinese classrooms. This would not only engage students and enable them to be fully involved in the classroom participation, but also improve their language skills comprehensively. To this end, concerted efforts and cooperation between educational departments and learning institutions, as well as instructors, are needed to reach a consensus and common understanding. Simultaneously, intervention programs, such as joint bridging courses, could be established before students embark on their studies abroad. This would help to build their language skills, reduce their learning shock, and help them to prepare for their future studies in Australia or other Western countries.

Second, Australian tertiary institutions would do well to learn more about Chinese students’ learning difficulties, and to better understand their prior experiences of teaching and learning. This would enable host instructors to establish what interventions are needed at which stages and to assist learners in developing their own learning strategies in the course of academic
adaptation.

5.4 Limitations and directions for future research

As illustrated above, this study has sought to bridge a gap in the literature. However, only qualitative methods - interviews and classroom observation - were utilized. In future research, other research methods and instruments (such as surveys) could be incorporated to explore further insights into students’ perceptions and enhance the data validity. For example, to track the development of learners’ views, a longitudinal and comparative method could be adopted to gather and contrast information about participants’ views at different stages during their adaptation process.

Furthermore, previous studies (e.g. Spada, 2006) have identified that a mismatch between learner beliefs and teaching practices has the potential to influence learners’ learning outcomes. Future studies in relation to teachers’ responses are therefore needed to determine whether such incongruence exists and poses a genuine challenge.

Finally, the sample of ten Chinese female learners may not be representative of the general population of Chinese students. Further research could include a broader variety of participants by means of questionnaires to avoid research bias and enhance the accuracy of the results.
References


Chung, I. F., & Huang, Y. C. (2009). The implementation of communicative language teaching:


Ikpia, V. I. (2001). *The attitudes and perceptions of adult English as a second language students toward explicit grammar instruction* (Doctoral thesis), New Mexico State University, USA.


Appendix 1: Interview

Section A Participant’s demographic information

Name:
Age:
Gender:
Phone:
Email:

Highest degree completed:
Degree applying for:
IELTS test score:
Hometown in China:
Residence in Australia:

English proficiency in the class:
Good fair poor
Section B Interview questions

Part 1 Students’ perceptions of English language teaching and learning in Australia

1.1 Perception in relation to the students’ impressions:

From what you see, hear, and do at the ELC, can you tell me about your general impressions of English classes? How do you view these classes in terms of teacher/learner roles, teacher behavior, teaching materials, teaching and learning activities, the learning environment, and assessments?

1.2 Perceptions in relation to the students’ interpretations of representations:

1) Given your English learning experience in China, what did you expect to observe in the Australian English language classes? Tell me about your experiences of learning English in China and Australia (ELC). What do you feel about the way English is taught and learned in China, compared with your experiences in Australia?

2) Tell me about the activities at the ELC that you find most useful in helping you to improve your communication skills (e.g. group discussion, pair work, oral presentations)? What do you think about learning to communicate with your teacher and classmates?

1.3 Perceptions in relation to the students’ affective experiences:

1) Could you please talk about the teaching and learning activities that you enjoy most (e.g. group discussions, grammar exercises, or presentations)?

2) Could you please talk about the teaching and learning activities that you dislike or that you feel uncomfortable with (e.g. group discussions, grammar exercises, and presentations)?

Part 2 Students’ learning difficulties at the ELC

1) In your responses to the above questions, you referred to the following differences between the two contexts (China and Australia), in terms of English language teaching and learning.
   a. AAAAA
   b. BBBBB
   c. CCCCC

73
How do these differences affect your English language learning in Australia? Can you elaborate on the difficulties you have faced as a result of these differences?

2) Do you think your prior learning experiences (e.g. the focus of classroom teaching/ exams/ assignments/ class sizes/ the physical layout of classroom/ teacher behavior) facilitate or impede your language learning in Australia?

3) Which aspects of learning English at the ELC do you find most helpful and which aspects do you find less helpful or difficult (e.g. reading, speaking, listening, and writing)?
### Classroom Observation Chart 1

**Teacher:** Ms. Bishop  
**Date:** 6/4  
**Lesson:** Be a guest  
**Time:** 110 mins  
**Class:** G 4.2a

*Note: T-C means teacher teaches the whole class; S-S-S means students work individually; GG means students work in groups; SS-SS means students work in pairs.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time (mins)</th>
<th>Sequence of lesson</th>
<th>Teacher activity</th>
<th>Student activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 15:25 - 15:35 | Greetings  
Task1: continue the task of last session: practice PowerPoint slide record show | Teacher briefly explains the task and asks volunteers to come forward to demonstrate. | A student volunteers to demonstrate her PowerPoint slide record show.  
(T-C) (S, S, S) |
| 15:35 - 15:55 | Task 2: relative clause | 1. Teacher explains relative clauses (e.g. who/when/where/which) and asks students to produce sentences.  
2. Teacher asks students to complete sentences in the textbook by using relative clauses.  
3. Teacher asks students to provide answers. | Students produce sentences by using relative clauses.  
(T-C) (S, S, S)  
Students do the exercises in the textbook.  
(T-C) (S, S, S)  
Students volunteer to provide answers.  
(T-C) |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 15:55 - 16:05 | Task 3: vocabulary | 1. Teacher asks students to match vocabulary and phrases to situations in the textbook.  
2. Teacher asks students to provide answers. | Students do the matching exercises.  
(T-C) (S, S, S)  
Students call out answers.  
(T-C) |
| 16:05 - 16:10 | Task 4: drill | 1. Teacher asks students to listen to the phrases and notice how words ending in a consonant sound link together with words beginning with a vowel.  
2. Teacher asks students to repeat after each pause. | Students listen and repeat.  
(T-C) (S, S, S) |
| 16:10 - 16:45 | Task 5: role play | 1. Teacher demonstrates how to use “What can I get you please?”.  
2. Teacher asks students to sketch food and drinks on the wall.  
3. Teacher asks students to act out the scene in pairs by assuming the roles as host and guest. | Students listen.  
(T-C)  
Students sketch food and drinks on the wall.  
(T-C) (S, S, S)  
Students use drinks and food that have been sketched to role play the conversations.  
(T-C) (SS-SS) |
| 16:45 - 17:15 | Task 6: Book Club Café | 1. Teacher asks students to sit in groups and share what has been read and new words with their peers.  
2. Teacher goes to each group to facilitate learning. | Students sit in groups chatting and sharing.  
(T-C) (GG)  
Students share with the teacher to reflect on their opinions.  
(T – C) |
## Classroom Observation Chart 2

**Teacher:** Ms. Smith  
**Date:** 4/5  
**Lesson:** Second life  
**Time:** 115 mins  
**Class:** G 4.1a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time (mins)</th>
<th>Sequence of lesson</th>
<th>Teacher activity</th>
<th>Student activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 15:20 - 15:30 | Greetings  
Task 1: warm-up | Teacher introduces lesson plan and asks students to introduce themselves. | Students introduces themselves.  
(T-C) (S, S, S) |
| 15:35 - 15:42 | Task 2: matching exercise | 1. Teacher asks students to match the words in bold with the words/phrases in the box.  
2. Teacher asks students to provide answers. | Students do the matching exercises.  
(T-C) (S, S, S)  
Students volunteer to share the answers with the class  
(T-C) |
| 15:42 - 16:37 | Task 3: listening task | 1. Teacher asks students to discuss what they can do in second life to activate their schemata.  
2. Teacher asks students to watch the DVD titled Avatar and put the pictures in the correct order. | Students discuss in pairs.  
(T-C) (SS-SS)  
Students watch the DVD and number the pictures.  
(T-C) (S, S, S) |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>16:37 - 5:15</th>
<th>Task 4: Book Club Café</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Teacher asks students to sit in groups and share what has been read and new words with their peers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Teacher goes to each group to facilitate learning.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students sit in groups chatting and sharing. (T-C) (GG)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students share with the teacher to reflect on their opinions. (T-C)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 3. Teacher gives instructions and plays the DVD a second time. |
| 4. Teacher explains the content of the DVD. |
| 5. Teacher plays the DVD again and asks students to discuss questions in the textbook in groups. |
| 6. Teacher asks each group to present their answers. |
| 7. Teacher asks students to write their own avatar. |
| 8. Teacher asks students to share their avatar with others. |
| Students work in groups sharing the information and matching the picture with the content. (T-C) (GG) |
| Students listen to the teacher. (T-C) |
| Students discuss in groups. (T-C) (GG) |
| Each group nominates a student and the student shares the information with the class. (T-GG) |
| Students write their own avatar. (T-C) (S, S, S) |
| Students discuss about their avatar in groups. (T-C) (GG) |

Students sit in groups chatting and sharing. (T-C) (GG) Students share with the teacher to reflect on their opinions. (T-C)
# Classroom Observation Chart 3

**Teacher:** Mr. Park  
**Date:** 4/5  
**Lesson:** Academic writing  
**Time:** 120 mins  
**Class:** BAE 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time (mins)</th>
<th>Sequence of lesson</th>
<th>Teacher activity</th>
<th>Student activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 10:45 - 12:10 | Task 1: academic writing | **1.** Teacher explains marking criteria of topic sentence.  
**2.** Teacher distributes students’ (previously completed) writing assignments and asks them to work in pairs and revise each other’s work.  
**3.** Teacher goes to each group listening and discussing the assignments with students.  
**4.** With the whole class, the teacher utilizes students’ writing to explain how to link sentences and paragraphs together with proper linking devices and relative clauses.  
**5.** Teacher demonstrates how to organize and structure a paragraph. | **Students listen to the teacher.**  
(T-C)  
**Students discuss and revise each other’s writing assignment in pairs.**  
(T-C) (SS – SS)  
**Students talk with the teacher.**  
(T-SS)  
**Students listen to the teacher and ask questions.**  
(T-C)  
**Students listen to the teacher and ask questions.**  
(T-C) |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Task 2: book club café</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12:10 - 12:45</td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Teacher gives instruction for the activity and introduces a book he has read.</td>
<td>Students listen to the teacher. (T-C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Teacher asks students to sit in groups and share what has been read and new words with their peers.</td>
<td>Students sit in groups chatting and sharing. (T-C) (GG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3. Teacher goes to each group to facilitate learning.</td>
<td>Students share with the teacher to reflect on their opinions. (T-C)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3: Recruitment advertisement

Looking for Chinese adult learners who would like to share their English language learning experiences

Are you a Chinese English language learner and interested in the language research? Come along and join us to share your English language learning experiences! We are keen to listen to you and learn from your experiences!

Eligibility: you must be a native Chinese speaker, completed high school or undergraduate education in China, and have finished a minimum of one block (15 weeks) of English course at the English Language Center (ELC) of Macquarie University.

What is expected: you are expected to talk about experiences and perceptions of English language teaching/learning both in China and Australia and reflect on the learning journeys at the ELC. The interview will be conducted in Chinese and may take one hour. It would be very casual and pleasant.

Benefit: participants will be reimbursed for xx for the time they have contributed.

If you are interested in the study or have any queries, please feel free to contact Jie Fan. Her contact details are as follows:

Tel: xxxx
Email: xxxx

Thank you very much!
Appendix 4: Ethics approval letter

FHS Ethics <fhs.ethics@mq.edu.au>
Mar 8, 2018, 11:38 AM

Dear Professor Riazi,

Re: "Chinese ESL (English as a Second Language) learners’ perceptions of English language teaching in Australia" (5201800063)

Thank you very much for your response. Your response has addressed the issues raised by the Faculty of Human Sciences Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee and approval has been granted, effective 8th March 2018. This email constitutes ethical approval only.

This research meets the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). The National Statement is available at the following website:


The following personnel are authorised to conduct this research:

Professor Mehdi Riazi
Miss Jie Fan

Please note the following standard requirements of approval:

1. The approval of this project is conditional upon your continuing compliance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).

2. Approval will be for a period of five (5) years subject to the provision of annual reports.

   Progress Report 1 Due: 8th March 2019
   Progress Report 2 Due: 8th March 2020
   Progress Report 3 Due: 8th March 2021
   Progress Report 4 Due: 8th March 2022
   Final Report Due: 8th March 2023

NB. If you complete the work earlier than you had planned you must submit a Final Report as soon as the work is completed. If the project has been discontinued or not commenced for any reason, you are also required to submit a Final Report for the project.

Progress reports and Final Reports are available at the following website:

https://www.mq.edu.au/research/ethics-integrity-and-policies/ethics/human-ethics/resources
3. If the project has run for more than five (5) years you cannot renew approval for the project. You will need to complete and submit a Final Report and submit a new application for the project. (The five year limit on renewal of approvals allows the Sub-Committee to fully re-review research in an environment where legislation, guidelines and requirements are continually changing, for example, new child protection and privacy laws).

4. All amendments to the project must be reviewed and approved by the Sub-Committee before implementation. Please complete and submit a Request for Amendment Form available at the following website:

https://www.mq.edu.au/research/ethics-integrity-and-policies/ethics/human-ethics/resources

5. Please notify the Sub-Committee immediately in the event of any adverse effects on participants or of any unforeseen events that affect the continued ethical acceptability of the project.

6. At all times you are responsible for the ethical conduct of your research in accordance with the guidelines established by the University. This information is available at the following websites:


If you will be applying for or have applied for internal or external funding for the above project it is your responsibility to provide the Macquarie University’s Research Grants Management Assistant with a copy of this email as soon as possible. Internal and External funding agencies will not be informed that you have approval for your project and funds will not be released until the Research Grants Management Assistant has received a copy of this email.

If you need to provide a hard copy letter of approval to an external organisation as evidence that you have approval, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Secretariat at the address below.

Please retain a copy of this email as this is your official notification of ethics approval.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Naomi Sweller
Chair
Faculty of Human Sciences
Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee

FHS Ethics
Faculty of Human Sciences Ethics
CSC-17 Wallys Walk L3
Macquarie University, NSW 2109, Australia
Ethics Forms and Templates
https://www.mq.edu.au/research/ethics-integrity-and-policies/ethics/human-ethics/resources

The Faculty of Human Sciences acknowledges the traditional custodians of the Macquarie University Land, the Wattamattageal clan of the Darug nation, whose cultures and customs have nurtured and continue to nurture this land since the Dreamtime. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and future.