Student engagement in postsecondary English classes in China: The teachers' perspective

by

Yuanyuan Zhao

B.A., Zhengzhou University, 2005
M.S., Fort Hays State University, 2009

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2018

# Abstract

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This study was confined to English education to non-English major students in the context of Chinese higher education. Research questions were answered through a multiple case study approach guided by Self-Determination Theory, emphasizing the uniqueness of each participant's experiences and construction of meaning. Triangulation, participants' member check, and peer debriefing achieved the trustworthiness and rigor of the findings of this study.

Results indicate that the four participants appreciated student engagement and confirmed including group class activities and fostering rapport with students as effective ways to increase student engagement. Accordingly, participants viewed themselves as organizers, facilitators, counselors, and resources. Instructors' beliefs and students' motivation in English teaching and learning influenced the level of student engagement. Participants struggled with constraints from large class sizes, limited pedagogical knowledge, and a shortage of educational technology support.

On this basis, a reformation in English curriculum and teacher credentialing is recommended to enhance student engagement. For future studies, empirical research should

examine the correlational relationship between engaged pedagogies and academic performance. Further exploration of student engagement from the student perspective is also recommended to identify the most engaging pedagogical practices.

*Keywords*: student engagement, pedagogical practice, instructor-student relationship

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Approved by:

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# Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation

to my beloved family –

Marilyn Galle, Nelson Galle,

Xiaomei Li, Quandong Zhao,

Hua Wu, and Duowen Wu.

# Chapter 1 - INTRODUCTION

Globalization prompted the Chinese people to realize the importance of learning English, which is "the first truly global language" (McCrum, Cran, & MacNeil, 1992). Since 1978, signaling the end of the Cultural Revolution, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in China has been developing vibrantly (Wang, 1986). The Ministry of Education (MOE) made English the primary foreign language in the national curriculum, and English became a compulsory subject in the national college entrance examinations. At the university level, English is taught to all students, even non-English majors (Chen & Goh, 2011).

In contrast to the importance of English in China, undergraduate students are dissatisfied with English teachers using traditional teaching methods all the time, which cannot sufficiently address the complexity in teaching and engaging students in classes (Peng, 2016; Rao, 1996). Wang Qimin and Wang Jian (2003) discovered in their survey that up to 88% of students are not satisfied with college English teaching, and students feel they lack a sense of achievement. In traditional lecture settings, students experience anonymity, distraction, and decreased engagement (Blatchford, Edmonds, & Martin, 2003). In this passive learning model, students are unable to learn well when they are disengaged (Young, Robinson, & Alberts, 2009). Consequently, most native Chinese-speaking undergraduate students are not proficient in English, especially spoken English (Liu & Dai, 2003; Wen, 1999; Wolff, 2009).

The latest 2015 College English Teaching Guidelines emphasize the practical use of English and enhance students' English communicative competence as primary English teaching objectives (Xu & Fan, 2017). The gap between the English teaching requirements and teaching results stimulates English teachers in China to explore more effective pedagogical practices to

achieve student-centered teaching. Yet, there are various barriers that need to be conquered to fully achieve a student-centered teaching model in China.

English teachers in China express concerns about factors that constrain their English teaching strategies to get away from lecturing (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Chen & Goh, 2011; Lee, 2009; Wong, 2012; Zhu, 2003). External constraints include large class sizes, a lack of teaching resources, and examination stress (Deng & Carless, 2010; Lee, 2009; Wette & Barkhuizen, 2009). Internal constraints come from teachers' low self-efficacy with regard to oral English proficiency, inadequate pedagogical knowledge, and lack of training to successfully engage students in classes (Deng & Carless, 2010; Liu, 2002; Zhu, 2003). The other barriers come from students themselves, including their general characteristics (Liu, 2002), their conceptions toward teaching and learning (Mennenga, 2013), their motivation in learning English (Zhao & Campbell, 1995), and their classmates' influences (Zhang, Hu, & McNamara, 2015).

Chickering & Gamson (1987) highlight the importance of pedagogies of engagement in their influential publication *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education*. Engagement plays a dominant role in learning English (Alsowat, 2016; Coates, 2005). Alsowat (2016) believes that acquiring English is "a social act which involves students' activeness and participation" (p.109). Burns & Richards (2012) further claim that students should not acquire English for its own sake, but to learn English as a means of developing higher-order thinking skills. Higher-order thinking includes the three highest levels of Bloom's taxonomy (analyzing, evaluating and creating) (Alsowat, 2016). Students' higher-order thinking skills eventually enhance their motivation and achievement in learning English (Brookhart, 2010).

All the above-mentioned reasons motivate teachers in China to identify more effective methods, techniques, and materials to facilitate students to become more engaged and interested

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in learning English (Barkhuizen, 2009). Instead of being the "sage on the stage" (King, 1993, p. 30) where the central figure lectures while students take notes, teachers are expected to "respond flexibly to different contexts and use innovative ways to achieve overarching goals and specific objectives in teaching" (Peng, 2016, p. 29).

Much of the work on student engagement comes from research studies in the United States (Frisby & Myers, 2008; Harris, 2010; Shaw, Kominko, & Terrion, 2015; Tews, Jackson, Ramsay, & Michel, 2015; van Uden, Ritzen, & Pieters, 2013, 2014; Witkowski & Cornell, 2015). Rare research has been conducted in China to investigate student engagement in the Chinese context. Zhang et al. (2015) explored undergraduate student engagement at a Chinese university from the students' perspective. Thus, there is a demand for more exploration of how Chinese English instructors engage students inside classrooms in China's College English context.

## Overview of the Issues

Emphasizing students' engagement in the classrooms fulfills the latest national English curriculum demands issued in 2015 and named *Guidelines on College English Teaching*. The reform in 2015 highlights the importance of students' autonomous learning, which demonstrates the discard of the traditional teacher-centered classroom (Xu & Fan, 2017). The modification is also consistent with the widespread use of mass media and the fast pace of economic and technology development in China. Students' mentality and innovativeness are more valued than their capability in rote memorization. English as a language provides a channel for students not simply to communicate with the outside world, but to broaden their visions to explore their potentiality. Teachers should not only facilitate students through the learning process, but also

guarantee students autonomy in learning. The learning objectives demand high expectations for both students and teachers.

Teaching pedagogies recommended in national curricula have shifted to adjust to the orientation of reformation in guided national English curricula. Over the years the Ministry of Education (MOE) in China has launched several rounds of reforms and created six national college English curricula documents from 1985 to 2015 (Xu & Fan, 2017). Lam (2002) surveyed 407 English language learners from five age groups about their English learning experiences in China and discovered that the younger cohorts of English learners embrace better learning circumstances due to the shift of teaching objectives from reading abilities to communicative competency.

Heretofore, six national college English curricula documents divide contemporary English language teaching in colleges and universities into three phases: from 1985 to 2004, from 2004 to 2015, and years after 2015.

**From 1985 to 2004**

The MOE promulgated the National Syllabus for Non-English Majors in 1985 and 1986, for Engineering students and Arts and Science students, respectively (Wolff, 2009). These two syllabi emphasize cultivating language skills, especially reading skills, as the fundamental aim of English teaching. Yang (2000) summarizes the detailed requirement as "training proficient reading ability, certain listening and translation ability, and elementary writing and speaking ability, so that students could use English as a tool to acquire knowledge of their specialization" (p. 15). The course named College English has become mandatory to non-English majors at the tertiary level since 1985 (Xu & Fan, 2017).

The *College English Teaching Syllabus* issued in 1999 is a combined revision of the 1985 and 1986 syllabi. The specific College English teaching objectives are described to:

> develop in students a relatively high level of competence in reading and an intermediate level of competence in listening, speaking, writing and translation, enable them to communicate in English and help to lay a solid language foundation. (Xu & Fan, 2017, p. 274)

From 1985 to 2004, the purpose of college English teaching highlighted the importance of reading English to gain information. Correspondingly, the delivery of linguistic knowledge was the emphasis. Thus, the grammatical approach was widely used in Chinese English classrooms, featuring the teachers' dominant role in the classroom and the students' passive role in learning (Liu, 2011). Wolff (2009) depicts the traditional teaching methodology in China relies on "talk and chalk." He explains in detail that:

> the teacher stands at the front of the class copying sections from the text onto the board, which the students passively sit absorbing the teachers' 'words of wisdom.' Some students will raise their hand and stand to answer questions, but beyond this, students do not actively participate in the lesson. Students are not responsible for their own learning. The teacher tells them exactly what they should know. Students are only responsible for completing exercises and re-writing words and phrases outside class so that they can pass the next exam. Little emphasis is placed on teaching students how to critically appraise information and situations or to think creatively (outside the box). (p. 100)

The grammatical approach can be effective in developing literacy skills, but it is inefficient in the development of students' communicative competence (Herrera & Murry, 2016; Hymes, 1972). This approach is a typical knowledge transmission-based teaching method. Wolff

(2009) criticizes the traditional teacher-centered, spoon-fed teaching approach and indicates that it has led to many Chinese graduates' incompetence in spoken and written English.

The call for the adoption of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in China can be traced back to 1990s (Yu, 2001). The movement to import CLT and implant it into the Chinese context resulted from the failure to develop students' adequate level of communicative competence through the grammatical approach (Hu, 2002; Liu & Dai, 2003; Wen, 1999; Yu, 2001). Theoretically, CLT stresses interaction as both a means and the final goal of learning second/foreign languages (Wang, 2009). CLT provides students with an English immersion learning environment and encourages students' participation through class activities such as group discussion, group activities, and role-playing exercises.

The adoption of CLT in China supports the shift in curriculum to the functions of English rather than the structures. CLT is employed to improve students' listening and speaking competence. CLT engages students in meaningful English context in class and helps achieve English communication as the goal of English learning. CLT satisfies the achievement of a student-centered and discovery-based learning (Liu, 2016).

Despite the merits of CLT, it has not made the expected impact on English education in China (Hu, 2002; Liu, 2016; Ju, 2013; Yu, 2001). To foster communication in CLT requires teachers' strong English proficiency, abundant cultural background, and sufficient pedagogical knowledge. Yet, several factors constrained the adoption of CLT: the lack of qualified English teachers, large class sizes, insufficient resources and instructional time, examination pressures, and cultural resistance (Hu, 2002, 2003; Ju, 2013; Li & Richard, 2011; Nunan, 2003; Yu, 2001). Thus, intensive reading and analytic grammatical approach are still prevalent as students are

required to analyze grammatical points, study vocabulary, translate sentences, and complete exercises regularly (Cheng, 1988; Hu, 2002; Li & Richard, 2011; Sun, 2013; Yang, 2000).

**From 2004 to 2015**

In 2004, the Ministry of Education in China released the *College English Curriculum Requirements*. In 2007, an amendment of the 2004 version was launched (Xu & Fan, 2017). Sharply different from former documents, these two documents prioritized the all-round development of students' ability to use English. Meanwhile, teachers were mandated to adopt modern information technology to promote teaching innovation (Xu & Fan, 2017). By being granted greater leeway, college instructors of English have been experimenting with the latest western pedagogies developed in the United States (Lu & Ares, 2015).

Some innovative English teachers are experimenting with the Holistic English Program (Chiu, 2009; Wang, 2017), including task-based, project-based language teaching, which appears as an advanced teaching method. Wen & Liu (2007) report that students in their experimental group who were taught through a task-based approach are more active, confident, and engaged in learning than students in the control group. Features of the Holistic English Program include:

> replacing oral English learning with English conversation experience, replacing teachers with facilitators, replacing set phrases or speech pattern memorization with language acquisition, developing self-confidence, intrinsic motivation and autonomous learners and creative thinkers, (and) replacing graduates who are unable to produce comprehensible English with those who can. (Wolff, 2009, p. 135)

Meanwhile, the production-oriented approach (POA) has been developed to improve English classroom instruction at the tertiary level in China during the 2000s (Wen, 2016). Wen (2016) elaborates that POA integrates the strengths of western pedagogical approaches with

Chinese contextual features and aims to fulfill the needs to both expand students' linguistic knowledge base and promote English production. Being guided by the learning-centered principle, learning-using integration principle, and whole-person education principle, teachers implement POA through three phases of motivating, enabling, and assessing.

**After 2015**

The practicability of English and students' autonomous learning ability were set up as the priorities in English teaching and learning in the latest document *Guidelines on CET* (2015 Guidelines) that became widely adopted in 2015. The specific teaching objectives are to:

develop students' ability of using English, enhance cross-cultural communication awareness and communicative competence, develop their autonomous leaning ability and improve their comprehensive cultural quality, enabling them to use English effectively in study, living, social interaction and future work to meet the needs of nation, society and individuals. (Xu & Fan, 2017, p. 274)

Just like what Xu and Fan (2017) summarized, the trends among these six guiding documents include a transition from stress on language foundation to English practical use, from single evaluation to diversified evaluation methods, increasing attention to teacher education and innovative instructional approach. Liu (2011) further describes that the curriculum reform in China marks a deliberate shift from the traditional teacher-centered curriculum and pedagogy to student autonomy pedagogical practices, from knowledge transmission to knowledge construction. The teacher's role shifts from information giver to facilitator and organizer of the students' learning processes. Students are encouraged to enhance their comprehensive language skills through various class activities. These modifications underline students' active role in learning and it is the teacher's duty to engage them in his/her English classes in a manner that

invokes their interest in English learning. Therefore, engaging students in English learning has become the top priority for English teachers in China.

## Statement of the Problem

Student engagement in classes is valued among Chinese instructors (Ross, Cen, & Zhou, 2011; Wang, 2017; Zhu & Arnold, 2013) due to its high correlation with academic performance (Klem & Connell, 2004), active learning (Carver, 1996), emotional satisfaction (Astin, 1999), and personal development (Porter, 2006; Yin & Wang, 2016). Meanwhile, fostering student engagement also aligns with requirements from the latest national college English curriculum in China.

However, abundant research has identified that constraints impede the establishment of an authentic student-centered learning environment in tertiary institutions in China. College level instructors of English are challenged with obstacles including: large class sizes, a lack of teaching resources, examination stress, teachers' low self-efficacy with regard to their oral English proficiency, inadequate pedagogical knowledge, and lack of professional training (Deng & Carless, 2010; Lee, 2009; Liu, 2002; Wette & Barkhuizen, 2009, Zhu, 2003). The other obstacles come from the students' unwillingness to interact in class (Barkhuizen, 2009) and their dissatisfaction with currently used textbooks (Peng, 2016). What is more, the pervasive influence of Confucian ideas makes teachers behave as if they alone hold knowledge that they must display and impart to their students who need it (Ju, 2013; Yu, 2001).

Teachers' professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions are the essential elements for career success (Freeman, 2007a). Scholars testify that teachers can foster student engagement inside their classrooms through affective teacher-student relationship building (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Frisby & Myers, 2008; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011), pedagogical practices

application (Mcgroarty et al., 2004; Tews et al., 2015), and influences from teachers'

dispositions (Smith & Skarbek, 2013). Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) state that teacher

support, interpersonal rapport with students, classroom structure, appropriate level of autonomy

support and authentic, as well as challenging, tasks positively correlate with student engagement

in class. Therefore, this study was designed to explore how Chinese instructors of English foster

student engagement at the college classroom level.

## Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore four experienced college-level English

instructors' experiences in engaging students inside classrooms in Henan province in China

through three perspectives: student-relationship building, pedagogical practices, and teachers'

dispositions. Knowledge, skill, and dispositions are identified as the primary constructs in

effective teaching (Knopp & Smith, 2005). Huang (2010) identified that successful Chinese

English teachers depend on their English language proficiency, language-teaching skills,

interpersonal communication abilities, and personalities. Because of the diversity among the

elements mentioned above, these issues call for additional investigation with detailed description

of how successful English instructors implement strategies, methods, and other skills to fully

engage students in their classes.

### Research Questions

This study was conducted to investigate two research questions:

1. What are the experiences of the four Chinese instructors of English as they engaged

   students in classes?

2. What are the experiences of the four Chinese instructors of English regarding their

   relationship building with students?

# Theoretical Framework

**Theory Statement**

The theoretical framework is the lens through which the researcher tries to understand studies (Bhattacharya, 2007) and also it guides the researcher by providing a number of assumptions (Crotty, 1998). Crotty (1998) defines "theoretical perspective" as the "philosophical stance lying behind a methodology, which provides a context for the process involved and a basis for its logic and its criteria" (p. 66). The theoretical framework forms the theoretical foundation to this study.

The theoretical framework of this study is symbolic interactionism under the banner of interpretivism. Symbolic interactionism assumes that "meaning making is a process of social interaction and meaning making can be modified through the process of interpretation and interaction by the individual" (Bhattacharya, 2007, p. 57). In symbolic interactionism, people give meanings to any symbol they are exposed to as a base for their cultural background, living experiences, and understandings of the world. People choose to react according to their personal interpretations.

The assumption of symbolic interactionism is that "the world that exists for human beings and for their groups are composed of 'objects' and these objects are the product of symbolic interaction" (Blumer, 1969, p. 10). Physical objects, social objects or abstract objects are all included. People give meanings to those objects by interacting with them. The central notions of symbolic interactionism are "the putting of oneself in the place of the other" (Crotty, 1998, p. 75) and "human beings interpret or 'define' each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions" (Blumer, 1969, p. 79). People choose how to react and respond

based on their understandings and evaluations of the symbols. During their interaction with the outside world, people constantly change their behaviors based on their new understandings.

The basic tenets and assumptions of symbolic interactionism, as noted by one of Mead's students, Herbert Blumer (1969), include the following:

- that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that these things have for them;

- that the meaning of such things is derived from, and arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows;

- that these meanings are handled and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with things encountered. (p. 2)

People constantly develop various meanings through their interaction with others. Symbolic interactionism is an approach to try to identify meaning, to discover how the interactive process influences the meaning people have, and to understand how they take subsequent actions.

The specific theory guiding this study is Self-Determination Theory (SDT). It was initiated by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, focusing on the quality of learners' motivation behind students' variation in their engagement and enthusiasm in learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Quality of motivation refers to "the type or kind of motivation that underlies the learner's engagement" (Shih, 2008, p. 314). SDT posits that "autonomy, competence, and relatedness are cross-culturally universal psychological needs" (Jang, Reeve, Ryan, & Kim, 2009, p.644) to enhance intrinsic motivation. Autonomy allows students to initiate and manage their behaviors with a high level of volition and choices (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence motivates students to "exercise their capacities, seek out optimal challenges, and extend their

skills" (Jang et al., 2009, p. 644). Relatedness implies students' emotional feeling of connection to the environment and others in caring relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In general, the satisfaction of psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential to students' intrinsic motivation in learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

**Application to the Study**

Symbolic interactionism is applicable for this study based upon the exploration of how participants construct meaning for their teaching experiences in college level English classes in China. The participants come from the same higher education culture in the Chinese context. The findings of this research are specifically suitable for English teaching in China. These participants could have various perceptions and reflections on this idea as they reflect on student engagement in their English teaching experiences.

In view of the tenets of symbolic interactionism, these four experienced English teachers have adjusted their teaching and change themselves to satisfy students' needs in order to engage them in their classes. The three psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness provided three frames to interpret teachers' teaching methods and interpersonal skills. It was beneficial to use symbolic interactionism and SDT to understand the participants' ideas on how they saw themselves in teaching, their students' engagement inside the classroom, and their personal relationship with the students.

**Methodology**

The symbolic interactionism theoretical framework for this study was applied through a constructive-based inquiry case study of four participants' English teaching experiences in higher education in China. Yin (1994) defines a case study as an "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the

boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). Case studies are commonly used in qualitative research studies to "answer focused questions with in-depth inquiries" (Bhattacharya, 2007, p. 92). These four participants' college level English teaching was the case bounded by the interest of the researcher. This case study was appropriate for developing an in-depth understanding of college-level English teaching by focusing on student engagement inside classes.

Data were collected through student surveys, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, class observations, and reflective journals. Students from participants' classes completed a survey to evaluate student-instructor relationship and student engagement. Two informal conversations, two semi-structured interviews, and three class observations were conducted with each participant. The researcher's reflective journals were gathered as a source of data. Thematic analysis was used in analyzing gathered data. Data were categorized into themes addressing the research questions.

## Limitations and Possibilities of the Study

This study has contributed to a deeper understanding of how to implement various strategies to facilitate and enhance students' engagement in English classes in China. The depth of this study depended on the extent of openness of the participants regarding what they were willing to share. To fully capture the deep thoughts that the participants exposed to me, I took steps to gather multiple sources of data, conduct participants' member check, and peer debriefing. When gathering the information from the participants' experiences, I attempted to remove myself as a researcher to reduce personal bias and to rely on successful completion of the research. Detailed processes are depicted in Chapter 3.

The main limitation of this study is the exclusion of students' personal reports on actual engagement in classes as well as relationship building with their instructors. This study only examined college-level English teaching through instructors' perspectives. Future research could be conducted to analyze college students' perspectives on effective teaching strategies used in English classes to enhance their interests in learning English.

The other limitation comes from data gathered in this study. Research data came from two courses – Comprehensive English, along with English Listening and Speaking. Depending on the teaching content, instructors may vary in the implementation of pedagogical practices. What is more, students may have different expectations in each course, which may influence their engagement inside the classroom. Future studies also could be detailed in exploring unique teaching methods in engaging students in a specific course. Chinese college students take separate English courses emphasizing English reading, listening, speaking, and writing. It will be beneficial to English teachers to comprehend the commonalities and differences in teaching various English courses.

Participants teaching in the same city along with the small sample size made it impossible to capture the holistic understanding of English teaching in postsecondary Education. Therefore, possible areas for future study include the involvement of more Chinese instructors of English from various provinces to share their insights and experiences in engaging students as well as fostering a good relationship with students to expand the generalizability of research results.

Findings of this study demonstrate that the continued pursuit of high scores in high stake tests makes it impossible for Chinese instructors of English to discard the traditional teaching methods when instilling linguistic knowledge to their students. Therefore, it would be nearly

impossible to determine whether the implementation of engaged pedagogy could increase students' academic performance in English examinations.

## Practical Implications of the Study

This study emphasized exploring teachers' pedagogical practices to facilitate student engagement, which has great implications for other teachers of English in China. Based on the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), such vital psychological needs as autonomy, competence, and relatedness engage and motivate students in learning. Thus, the results of this study provide English teachers examples and guidance in how to employ various teaching methods to meet the needs from SDT. Meanwhile, it helps English teachers to meet the needs of innovation in English teaching.

Research results affirm that Chinese students would be actively engaged once a strong instructor-student relationship is fostered. When building rapport with students by either recognizing their names or providing individualized feedback, participants made students feel respected, noticed, and cared for. To avoid humiliating students publicly is crucial to make students feel respected. These findings provide deep insights into the participants' interpersonal teacher behavior and offer Chinese instructors practical guidance and suggestions in interaction with Chinese students. By reflecting on participants' teaching experiences, other teachers in China will begin to realize the importance of rapport with students and then improve their interpersonal teacher behavior for a better relationship with the students.

Findings of this study recommend needed change in practices and policies for teacher credentialing in China. Participants admitted that they were qualified to become instructors of English simply based on their strong English proficiency instead of their pedagogical knowledge.

Thus, it is time to implement pedagogical training to prepare teacher candidates for teaching. What is more, periodic professional training is demanded to enhance teaching and learning.

This study supports the argument to update current national English curriculum in higher education to meet the requirements to cultivate students' autonomous learning and enable students to capture effective use of English. What is more, findings of this study conceal that English teaching lacks educational technology support inside the classroom.

## Operationalization of Constructs

- *Chinese Instructors of English*: Chinese instructors who teach English courses that focus on different domains of English – listening, speaking, writing, reading and English grammar in tertiary education in China. More than 100,000 Chinese instructors of English work in China, and most of them graduated in English language and literature programs from the English department of a college or university (Li, Hou, & Zhai, 2015).

- *Engaged pedagogy*: A progressive and interactive teaching approach proposed by bell hooks (1994) to achieve holistic learning by emphasizing education of freedom. The components of engaged pedagogy include re-conceptualization of knowledge, linking of theory and practice, student empowerment, culturalism, and incorporation of passion (Florence, 1998).

- *Enhancement of Student Engagement*: The enhancement of student engagement is based on the increase in students' interests, participation in class activities, and devotion in learning English from the teachers' perspective.

- *Henan Province*: It is located in the central part of China, which is a densely populated province. Based on the information from the official website of The

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People's Government of Henan Province, Henan is China's third most populous

province with a population of over 95 million at the end of 2016 within an area of

64,479 square miles. According to the statistics from the Ministry of Education of

the People's Republic of China, the province has 134 higher educational institutes

in 2017. Each higher educational institution provides English as a foreign

language courses to all its students.

- *Instructional Strategies*: "A strategy is a collection of philosophically grounded

  and functionally related techniques that serves as an implementation component

  of an instructional method" (Herrera & Murry, 2016, p. 184). Some strategies

  used in English classes are hands-on activities, heterogeneous grouping, visual

  aids, and guarded vocabulary. Methods are orderly and well-planned procedures

  aimed at facilitating and enhancing students' learning.

- *Pedagogical Practices*: Instructional strategies that teachers use to teach students.

  Strategies are selected based on teachers' educational beliefs, the needs of the

  learner, and the requirements of the task.

- *Postsecondary English Classes*: English language courses to both English majors

  and non-English majors in universities and colleges.

- *Spoken and Written English Proficiency*: The ability of an individual to speak or

  perform and write English. Proficiency means "the degree of control one has over

  the language in question" (Hamayan & Damico, 1991, p. 41).

- *Student Engagement*: The time and effort students invest in learning. Engagement

  is more than "involvement and participation. It requires feelings and sense-

  making as well as activity" (Harper & Quaye, 2009, p. 5). In this study, student

engagement includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Barkaoui, Barrett, Samaroo, Dahya, Alidina, & James, 2015) demonstrated inside the classroom.

- *Teachers' Dispositions*: "The values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities and affect student learning, motivation and development as well as the educator's own professional growth" (NCATE, 2002, p. 52).

## Chapter Summary

The discussion in this chapter started with a brief introduction of English education in higher educational institutions in China. The outlined context of national curriculum requirements in English teaching in China explained the urgent needs to employ student-centered pedagogical engagement in English teaching. It then analyzed the existing pedagogical practices and depicted the trend for combined engaging teaching methods to improve students' English proficiencies. The theoretical framework was explained after offering the rationale for conducting this study. Self-Determination Theory was used as the leading theory guiding this study. The case study methodological framework and its appropriateness for this study were elaborated. This chapter also stressed the importance of this study and identified limitations and potential for future studies.

# Chapter 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

## The History of English Education in China

The history of English education in China highly correlates with the country's social and political change, which in turn has influenced people's attitudes toward English language learning and teachers' pedagogical practices. In the mid-seventeenth century, English was introduced to China during the establishment of the first British trade post in Guangdong province in the eastern part of China (Chang, 2015). Around the 1860s, western missionaries and Chinese reformers initiated formal English education in the Qing dynasty (Yang, 2000). English learning through the establishment of the interpreters' college was regarded as a way to strengthen China by the Qing government (Chang, 2015). Western missionaries founded schools to spread western civilization and bring Chinese people to the soul of God, whereas Chinese reformers believed English was a channel to gain access to western technology and science (Adamson, 2004). Nevertheless, only the elite – "siblings of the officials, the rich, and the intellectuals" (Ng & Tang, 1997, p. 64) had access to learning English as a tool to strengthen national power and keep China's sovereignty.

After the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, English became a core subject in secondary schools during the Republic Era and using authentic English materials (Chang, 2015). "May Fourth Movement," a student movement protesting Japanese aggression and Chinese government's corruption on May 4th, 1919, was the turning point of Chinese people's perception of the western world (Yang, 2000). The openness to western ideas of democracy enhanced the importance of English, which became a language of "business, commerce, finance, and education" and "a gateway to social, economic, and geographical mobility" (Yang, 2000, p. 3).

From then on, English education in China has fluctuated during times of social, economic, and political change in China.

The political atmosphere in China and its relationship with the western world has largely influenced English education since the establishment of People's Republic of China in 1949 (Yang, 2000). Lam (2002) traces the rise and fall of English education after 1949 in China through three phases. During the early 1950s, Russian was the primary foreign language being taught in China, which attributed to China's political alignment with the communist nations. With the deterioration of relations with the Soviet Union, English education resumed its popularity in the late 1950s in China. Ten years of Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 stagnated English education until its reinstatement to higher education in 1977. The year 1979 is a landmark to English education in China because the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) issued a document to highlight the importance of English learning and teaching (Zhang, 1984). English has held onto its supremacy role in foreign language teaching in China since then.

Thereafter, English kept its supremacy status in foreign language teaching in China for forty years and counting. Lam (2005) divides the role of English education played in China after 1977 into two phases: English for modernization (1977-1990) and English for international status (from 1991 until now). China's economic growth and globalization are currently driving the prominence and popularity of English in China. According to a national survey conducted by Wei and Su in 2012, a total of 390.16 million out of 415.95 million Chinese foreign-language learners (or 93.8% Chinese foreign-language learners) chose to learn English.

# Post-Secondary English Education in China

**Brief History of English Education in Tertiary Education in China**

During the Republic Period (1919-1949), English teaching at the college level varied from mission colleges to Chinese colleges and from the coast to central China (Yang, 2000). In mission colleges, English was normally taught by native English speakers with an emphasis on conversation and composition (Yang, 2000). Through the usage of original materials from the West and immersion of English through extensive reading and daily communication, students in mission schools learned authentic English knowledge (Yang, 2000).

In contrast, Chinese colleges during the same period emphasized English reading and translation skills. English was taught through the Grammar-Translation method to develop English listening and speaking skills (Yang, 2000). The Grammar-Translation method highlighted grammatical accuracy through students' memorization of vocabulary, application of grammar rules demonstrated by the teacher, and translation of the written text (Herrera & Murry, 2016). With the Grammar-Translation method, teachers' English proficiency level largely determined their English input in the classroom. Students' learning results differed significantly, due to the teachers' English proficiency.

By 1952, the communist government took over all the foreign-run schools and higher educational institutions (Yang, 2000). Along with China's alignment with the Soviet Union, Russian became the preeminent foreign language taught in higher education from the early 1950s through the early 1960s (Chang, 2015). Meanwhile, English quickly lost its position in school curricula. Chang (2015) describes the situation. "It is estimated that in 1952 only eight colleges in China were teaching English, and there were only 545 college English teachers in 1956" (p.

34). After the split with the Soviet Union, English became an important language for Chinese people to communicate with the outside world.

In 1964, China's Ministry of Education (MOE) officially designated English as the first foreign language, which was then taught in all levels of the educational system in China (Chang, 2015). English departments existed within 74 universities by 1965 (Cheng & Wang, 2012). Based on the curriculum requirement to "acquire a working knowledge of the language without acquiring foreign ideas," college students were to be able to "read English materials of their specialty" and "handle a certain level of conversation" (Yang, 2000, p. 9). The Audiolingual method was introduced into China to enhance students' English listening and speaking competency (Cheng & Wang, 2012; Yang, 2000). The characteristics of the Audiolingual method included the mechanical memorization of dialogues and pattern drills (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). The intensive linguistic knowledge learning was supposed to train Chinese English-speaking citizens to serve the Chinese government (Cheng & Wang, 2012).

The ten-year Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, eliminated Chinese interaction with the outside world, and all foreign languages including English were rejected from school curricula (Cheng & Wang, 2012). School students suspended their studying and revolted during that turbulent sociopolitical period (Cheng & Wang, 2012). Around 1970, English was reinstated as a school subject to serve the government's political purpose taught with the traditional Grammar-Translation method. Yang (2000) describes that "political slogans, moral doctrines, and negative descriptions of the capitalist society constituted the themes of textbooks during that period" (p. 11). Because of the politically oriented English learning materials employed and the lack of contact with the western world, English learning during this period was characterized by

"the inculcation of political expressions and an extreme lack of understanding English cultures" (Yang, 2000, p. 13).

Against the backdrop of China's "Four Modernizations (modernizing agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology)", China's "open-door policy" and new leader Deng Xiaoping's affirmation of the importance of education to speed China's economic development, the demand for speakers of English and other foreign languages have increased dramatically since 1978 (Cheng & Wang, 2012). The knowledge of foreign languages enables the Chinese people to obtain updated information on science and technology, cooperate with multinational corporations, enhance Chinese tourism, and engage in foreign trade business. Ultimately, Chinese economy and comprehensive national power are strengthened.

The English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in China has been developing rapidly since 1978 when the National College Entrance Examination system was resumed. Cortazzi and Jin (1996) estimated that by the 1990s there were around 57 million school and university students studying English, around 150 million part-time students learning English, and 200 million English users in China. Currently over 390 million Chinese people are learning English (Wei & Su, 2012).

**Current English Education at Chinese Universities**

English majors and non-English majors comprise the two systems of English-language teaching in Chinese colleges and universities (Chang, 2015). Non-English majors are the majority of English learners, compared to the number of English majors in tertiary institutions (Chang, 2015; Cortazzi, & Jin, 1996). After admission to colleges and universities, non-English majors are required to complete another two years of English learning, receiving around 300 classroom hours of English instruction (Zhao & Campbell, 1995). During the first two years,

non-English majors take a mandatory course named *College English* for three to four class hours each week, 17 weeks each semester (Hartse & Jiang, 2015). Besides specialized knowledge, non-English majors' English competence enhances their competitiveness in job markets.

English major graduates are trained to be capable to employ English as a working tool in all domains after receiving around 3,000 hours of English instruction. English major students are supposed to acquire "at least 10,000 vocabulary items, a sound knowledge of English grammar, very high-level skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing, and an ability to translate simple texts from Chinese into English and vice versa" (Zhao & Campbell, 1995, p. 380). The number of Chinese universities offering an English major increased from 200 in 1995 to around 800 in 2015 (Hartse & Jiang, 2015). Current statistics from the Minister of Education indicate that more than 100,000 English major undergraduate students graduated in 2016.

The College English Tests (CET) and the Tests for English Majors (TEM) are both compulsory, paper-based, high stake tests for non-English majors and English majors to assess their English learning results. They both are mandatory by the Higher Education Department and the Ministry of Education in China. The CET consists of four parts: listening comprehension (35%), reading comprehension (35%), cloze or error correction (10%), and writing and translation (20%) (Zheng & Cheng, 2008). The TEM was launched in 1991, and it contains listening comprehension, reading comprehension, writing, grammar and vocabulary, translating, proofreading, and cloze (Jin & Fan, 2011). Until 2008, computer-based spoken English tests supplemented the TEM. Students who passed the oral test were awarded a separate certificate demonstrating their oral English proficiency level as "excellent," "good," or "pass" (Jin & Fan, 2011). English tests for college students still emphasize the content knowledge of English, rather than the value in communication.

Hartse and Jiang (2015) claim that a passing CET certificate or TEM certificate is a crucial prerequisite to desirable jobs, decent salarys, and better graduate schools. Yet, a CET certificate or TEM certificate is not always an accurate gauge of students' real English proficiency based on the content in the exams. The CET and TEM assess English language knowledge rather than language skills for authentic communication, which cannot meet with the urgent demand for the large number of English speakers in China.

Scholars blame the lack of competent English speakers for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) on teaching approaches (Chang, 2015; Wang, 2006; Wang, 2008). Grammar-based teaching methods, paper test drills in EFL classrooms, and infrequent use of English resulted in students' English reading proficiency scoring higher than spoken proficiency (Liu & Dai, 2003; Wei & Su, 2012; Wen, 1999). Thus, the *2015 Guidelines on College English Teaching* speaks highly of "teacher-led and student-centered teaching philosophy" and encourages teachers to adopt innovative computer-based and classroom-based teaching methods, such as "task-based, project-based, inquiry-based and cased-based teaching methods" (Xu & Fan, 2017, p. 278).

**Problems in English Teaching**

Chinese students realize the importance of English and are eager to learn English well (Lam, 2005; Pride & Liu, 1988; Yin & Wang, 2016). Meanwhile, their aspiration in learning English changes over time. Zhao & Campell (1995) discovered that most Chinese students learned English mainly for social and economic mobility rather than international communication, which is demonstrated by the overemphasis on examinations. Compared with the pursuit of high scores on paper-based tests, the practical usage of English as a communication tool fell into neglect.

Ten years later, Lam (2005) summarized that passing examinations remained a vital motivating element among all age groups of English learners, but to the younger generation, being able to communicate in English was as important as passing examinations. The statistics gathered by Lam (2005) indicate that watching television, seeing movies, practicing with tapes and materials in English, listening to English songs, together with reading English papers, magazines, and books are the primarily ways students learn English. These students expressed their dislike of the monotony of traditional Chinese teaching methods in most English classes.

The teacher-centered teaching style does not provide students opportunities to engage actively in the learning process. What is more, the passive learner simply accepts and remembers what is being told so it can be repeated later. Au (2011) criticizes knowledge-based learning as "a collection of disconnected facts, operations, procedures, or data mainly needed for rote memorization in preparation for the tests" (p. 31). The consequences are that, "students are increasingly learning knowledge associated with lower level thinking, and they are often learning this knowledge in fragmented chunks within the context of the tests alone" (Au, 2011, p. 31).

In striking contrast to students' dissatisfied with English teaching at universities are students at private English training schools who are enthusiastic about their learning. Numerous private English training schools with practical and flexible language training programs satisfy students' needs to gain proficient English competence. For example, Crazy English founded by Li Yang in 1994 and New Oriental School established by Yu Minhong in 1993 both have grown into multimillion-dollar English training enterprises (Hartse & Jiang, 2015).

To adjust to students' needs in learning English, innovation has been the theme in English teaching. The trend in teaching pedagogies in China has changed from Chinese traditional teaching into communicative competence-oriented holistic teaching (Adamson &

Morris, 1997; Cheng, 2011; Liu, 2016). Pedagogical practices in English teaching in tertiary education in China have developed from the Grammar-Translation method, the Audiolingual method, and the Communicative approach to a Holistic approach.

These newer methods address the needs of English learners, moving them from simply reading English materials to experiencing cross-cultural communication. Lei (2009) confirms that it is the *value* of language that should be taught in class rather than the *significance* of the language, because significance can be easily found in textbooks or dictionaries outside classroom. The significance of a language refers to "the explicit meanings that language items have as elements of the language system," and value refers to "the part of meaning that the language items have when they are actually put to use in acts of communication" (p. 77).

The adoption of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) came after the declaration of a series of educational policies to call for a change in curricula, syllabus, and teaching methods to enhance students' English proficiency, especially in speaking and listening (Chen & Goh, 2011). The CLT refers to "various approaches and methods for teaching a second language (L2) communicatively," which not only focus on speaking, but also involves "reading, writing, grammar, and culture" (Wong, 2012, p. 18).) Teachers behave as facilitators (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), participants (Littlewood, 2004), and coaches (Wong, 2012) in CLT by facilitating students' learning and communication, participating in class activities, and guiding students' learning.

Wang (2017) argues the importance of creating a "bilingual immersion environment to increase students' constant and intensive exposure to English so as to be able to acquire as much comprehensible input and produce as much comprehensible output as possible" (p. 110). Because language is primarily used in the context of and for communication, language learning

cannot be divorced from a specific context (Halliday, 1973; Hymes, 1972; Wang, 2017). Wang (2017) strongly recommends employing a content-based teaching model and theme-based model as a holistic way in English teaching by providing English context inside classroom.

Chinese students do not have many chances to practice English in authentic situations. Wei & Su (2012) demonstrate the low degree of frequency in use of English. "Only 7.3% and 23% of the people that had studied English claimed to use English 'often' or 'sometimes,' respectively" (p. 11). Similarly, Lam (2005) reports that 59% of undergraduates reported that they never speak English with classmates outside the classroom and no student claimed that they usually speak English outside the classroom. Therefore, the classroom has become the main or only place to communicate in English, which makes student engagement in classes highly demanded to develop their communicative competency.

Tensions existed between pedagogical practices and students' aspiration in learning English. Teachers blamed external constraints such as large classroom sizes and shortage of teaching resources, together with internal constraints such as their oral English proficiency and inadequate pedagogical knowledge which prohibited the implementation in communicative teaching (Deng & Charless, 2010; Lee, 2009; Liu, 2002; Wette & Barkhuszen, 2009). All these constraints compelled some teachers to adopt traditional teacher-centered teaching methods, which cannot meet students' needs to develop personal communicative competence.

What is more, English teachers are also longing for a change in their teaching (Chen & Goh, 2011; Lam, 2002; Penner, 1995). Chang (2006) depicts that a brain-drain (the departure of teachers from teaching) has happened to competent young and middle-aged English teachers at a rate of seven per cent each year in China. Those teachers complained teaching is boring and routine without much change in the teaching content and methods. Li (2015) explored that many

English teachers are experiencing burnout in China due to reasons from the job, students, management and teacher development. Chen and Goh (2011) conducted a survey of 331 EFL teachers from 44 universities in 22 cities across China and found that most teachers expressed eagerness to receive training in how to design and implement effective tasks to engage students in learning.

## Self-Determination Theory

Based on Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT), autonomy, competence, and relatedness are the essential psychological needs for intrinsic motivation in learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy emphasizes the power that students embrace in the learning process. Competence highlights the feeling of being challenged. Relatedness refers to the sense of connection and belonging in positive relationships.

**The Need for Autonomy**

Autonomy relates to self-initiation and self-regulation of actions (Deci & Ryan, 1991). Learner autonomy has become a popular topic and a desirable goal in modern language education (Benson, 2001; Blin, 2004; Jimenez Raya, 2011; Nunan, 1997). Learner autonomy is defined as the ability to take responsibility of personal learning (Alonazi, 2017). Little (1996) states that the ability of learning autonomously needs to be cultivated with teachers' intensive help.

Benson (2001) confirms that it is helpful to develop students' capacity of taking control over their own learning. Students experiencing autonomy display positive academic performance, emotions, and motivation. Furthermore, students embrace enhanced creativity and greater enjoyment (Kaur, Hashim, & Noman, 2015; Reeve, 2006). In autonomy supportive

conditions, students feel less pressured, become more highly interested, make more effort, and achieve better learning results (Dincer, Yesilyurt, & Takkac, 2012; Harmer, 2007).

To achieve the sense of autonomy, students can play collaborative roles in curriculum design and development by selecting learning materials and setting learning objectives (Alonazi, 2017; Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011). Tews et al. (2015) discovered that engaged content delivery significantly impacts students' engagement in class through the data from 727 undergraduates in 36 different courses. Engaging content delivery contains "creative examples, real-life examples, attention getters to generate student interest, instructor demonstrations of course content, interactive lectures, and instructor storytelling" (p. 19). Modifying the curriculum together with the students enables students to appreciate English and practice their critical thinking abilities.

To cultivate students' autonomy in learning, a teacher plays various roles. Voller (1997) states that facilitator, counselor, and resource are the teachers' roles in promoting autonomous language learning. He explains that a facilitator is the one who helps students make learning happen. Teachers help students through technical support and psycho-social support. Technical support includes analyzing needs, setting learning objectives, planning work, and selecting materials. Psycho-social support is the demonstration of support to the students, communicating and helping students overcome obstacles, and increasing their awareness in independent learning.

Gardner (2000) argues that a self-created assessment is recommended to grant autonomy to students in assessments. Students create their own assessments according to the ideas and instructions developed by the teacher. A self-created assessment is considered a way to balance out the benefits against the pitfalls of students' self-assessments and a teacher-prepared

assessment. Alonazi (2017) encourages students to reflect on and evaluate their learning process using the target language to increase their autonomy in learning.

**The Need for Competence**

Competence reflects the desire to exercise one's capabilities and skills in interactions with the environment to seek out and master optimal challenges (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Nicholson (2013) suggests fostering students' competence in learning English by highlighting what students can do in English, realizing the commonality of making mistakes, emphasizing that interaction is more important than accuracy, and sharing learning experiences. Needs of competence can be realized through providing structure, such as setting clear rules and demonstrating procedures. The specific methods include setting personal goals, promoting peer teaching, and sharing responsibilities with students to design and prepare class activities.

**The Need for Relatedness**

Relatedness refers to a sense of belonging, which includes developing secure and satisfying connections with others in some specific social surroundings (Deci & Ryan, 1991). The needs of relatedness also require that the teacher modifies curriculum from a "lecture-based delivery model to a more interactive and student-centered mode of teaching" (Exeter et al, 2010, p. 763). Meanwhile, lecture materials need to relate to the students' familiar environment (Exeter et al., 2010).

To fulfill the need of relatedness, students constantly communicate with other students and the teachers. A teacher is believed to behave as a counselor to encourage students to maximize their engagement through the use of interpretation, confirmation, and feedback (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). By offering supportive and positive feedback and advice to students, teachers establish positive relationships with students.

The rapport built as a component of the instructor-student relationship is the foundation of both successful teaching practice and a friendly learning environment. Rapport is defined as "the ability to build a relationship based on trust and harmony" (Frisby & Myers, 2008, p. 27). Speaking-in-class anxiety prevents students from verbally engaging in class activities (Mak, 2011). A friendly learning environment helps in reducing students' speaking-in-class anxiety and increase their motivation in learning (Awad, 2014).

Teachers' relatedness with students positively connects with their work engagement, whereas it negatively correlates with their emotional exhaustion (Klassen & Perry, 2012). Hagenauer, Hascher, & Volet (2015) conclude that both students' engagement and the quality of the relationship between teachers and students significantly correlate with teachers' behaviors in class. Those teachers who felt connected with students are more likely to be more joyful and less anxious during instruction. The affective bond between students and teachers is often reciprocal. Trigwell (2012) found out that teachers' positive emotion relates to a student-centered teaching approach. Students' engagement in the learning process motivates teachers' pedagogical practices, thus changing and improving their teaching.

## Student Engagement

Student engagement is regarded as a multifaceted construct by scholars (Fredricks et al., 2004), encompassing the devotion of time and engagement in educational activities (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). However, the definition of student engagement varies. Zhang et al. (2015) define student engagement as "involvement in learning activities and various other activities that promote personal development" (p. 121). The widely accepted version is "time and effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities" (Kuh et al., 2008, p. 542; Yin &

Wang, 2016, p. 603). Student engagement highlights the important role that students play in their learning process.

**Definition of Student Engagement**

Scholars today understand student engagement as a multidimensional construct and treat it as an antidote to heighten students' motivation in learning, improving academic achievement, and decreasing students' school drop-out rate (Fredricks et al., 2004). Even though the usage of this construct is prolific, the consensus about its definition and substantial variations is elusive (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). The common understanding of engagement always connects to commitment or investment, which is central to engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). The definition of engagement that is given in the Merriam-Webster dictionary includes "to bind to do something," "provide occupation to," and "hold the attention of." Similar to the scope of the meaning in the dictionary, individuals display engagement through various ways and among different levels. Over 15 definitions, explanations, and models of student engagement exist (Appleton et al., 2008).

Among various explanations of student engagement, the three subtypes of student engagement Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) defined are widely used, including behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement (Barkaoui et al., 2015). The three dimensions in student engagement incorporate several aspects inclusively; however, these dimensions also differ in light of "intensity and duration" (Barkaoui et al., 2015, p. 81). Behavioral engagement refers to students' behaviors in following the rules and completing assignments. Emotional engagement highlights psychological activities, such as interest, emotion, and value. Cognitive engagement denotes students' utilization of strategies and motivation in learning (Fredericks et al., 2004).

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Behavioral engagement draws on the actual behavior of participation, which includes "involvement in academic and social or extracurricular activities and is considered crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing dropping out" (Fredericks et al., 2004, p. 60). Three characteristics of behavioral engagement include positive conduct at school, involvement in learning activities, and participation in school-related activities (Fredericks et al., 2004). Students demonstrate various levels of behavioral engagement. The "low engaging students," as many scholars refer to them, are the ones who simply follow school rules, participate in class activities, and finish assignments without other extra efforts (Barkaoui et al., 2015; Fredericks et al., 2004). The "deep engaging students" are the ones who not only fulfill the teacher's requirements but also deeply reflect on and synthesize knowledge into real practice with intense intellectual engagement (Fredericks et al., 2004). These students, who value learning, go beyond merely working on the assignment and into a more profound way of learning.

Emotional engagement emphasizes students' affective reaction to the school, the classroom or the teacher, which "encompasses positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, and school and is presumed to create ties to an institution and influence willingness to do the work" (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 60). Emotions in this construct comprise interest, curiosity, stimulation, enthusiasm, optimism, happiness, boredom, depression, and anxiety (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Meanwhile, a sense of relatedness and belonging to school demonstrate emotional engagement (Appleton et al., 2008). For example, Finn (1989) analyzes students' emotional engagement through their identification with school, a sense of belonging, and personal value. He found out that students, who ascribe their success in school to their

school involvement, will in turn further enhance their identification with and their commitment to their school.

Fredricks et al. (2004) summarize the conceptualization of cognitive engagement from Connell and Wellborn (1991) as "flexibility in problem solving, preference for hard work, and positive coping in the face of failure" (p. 64). Using this model, Fredricks et al. (2004) further define such cognitive engagement as incorporating "thoughtfulness and willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills" (p. 60). By stressing investment in learning in cognitive engagement, researchers investigate this construct through two approaches: "psychological investment in learning" and "cognition in strategic learning" (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 64). Characteristics demonstrated in cognitive engagement include the utilization of metacognitive strategies, the establishment of connection among ideas, as well as motivation and persistence in learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). The width of strategic learning ranges from pure memorization to synthesized self-regulated learning (Barkaoui et al., 2015).

Educational researchers hold diverse perceptions of the relationships among the three subtypes of student engagement. Finn (1989) believes cognitive and emotional engagement is more important than behavioral engagement. Accordingly, some scholars investigate emotional engagement, behavior engagement, and cognitive engagement singly (e.g., Blumenfeld & Meece, 1988; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Helme & Clarke, 2001; Kindermann, McCollam, & Gibson, 1996; Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988; Steinberg, Brown & Dornbush, 1996). In contrast, Fredricks et al. (2004) claim that the three subtypes equally contribute to student engagement at school. Scholars with the same perspective preclude distinction among the subtypes of engagement and investigate student engagement as a holistic construct (e.g., Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994; Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990;

Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Connell, 1998; Stipek, 2002). This study aligns with the latter perspective.

**Importance of Student Engagement**

Insofar as the significance of student engagement, the consensus has already been achieved among scholars on the contribution of engagement to academic performance and personal development and satisfaction (Barkaoui et al, 2015; Mennenga, 2013; Porter, 2006; Yin & Wang, 2016). Student engagement inside the classroom provokes mentally active learning, which is defined as the ability to "internalize the thought processes necessary for problem solving – searching for explanations, figuring out ways of understanding, using imagination and being creative" (Carver, 1996, p. 11). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) confirm that student engagement promotes knowledge acquisition as well as general cognitive development. Students also benefit from engagement in their learning by reporting higher emotional satisfaction (Astin, 1993) and increasing affective learning (Frymier, 2005).

**Fostering Student Engagement Inside the Classroom**

After twenty years of research on student engagement, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) conclude that instructional and programmatic interventions can increase student engagement, which finally enhance knowledge acquisition. Classroom culture is the foundation for achieving a student-centered, engaging learning environment. Student-centered teaching approaches increase their engagement (Exeter et al., 2010). Penner (1995) formulates beliefs, pedagogy, and structure as the three basic elements of classroom culture. Beliefs are the shared value and expectations on the roles of students and teachers. Beliefs also include teachers' perceptions toward English teaching and learning. Pedagogy refers to strategies used by the teacher in the

classroom. Active teaching techniques including games, role-playing, and collaborative exercises exhibit greater engagement and better learning outcomes (Tews et al., 2015).

A teacher's personal educational philosophy directly influences his/her behavior and the way s/he conducts teaching (Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001; van Uden et al., 2014). The importance of selecting and identifying a particular educational philosophy prior to the curriculum design was demonstrated by curricular theorists, such as Oliva (2005) and Tyler (1949). Ornstein & Hunkins (2004) illustrate that the educational philosophies:

> answer what schools are for, what subjects are of value, how students learn, and what methods and materials to use. They provide schools with a framework for broad issues and tasks, such as determining the goals of education, the content and its organization, the process of teaching and learning, and in general what experiences and activities they wish to stress in schools and classrooms. (p. 31)

The teaching philosophy guiding a student-centered approach to English teaching can be described as Reconstructionism (Counts, 1932) and Progressivism (Dewey,1938). Counts (1932) advocates that, "an education that does not strive to promote the fullest and most thorough understanding of the world is not worthy of the name" (p. 9). Reconstructionism is very similar to Progressivism, but it is often seen as an outgrowth of it by focusing more on social reconstruction (Stern & Riley, 2001). Instead of following social change, Reconstructionism believes in the power of education to address social problems and create a better society. Both Progressive and Reconstructionism "underline the uniqueness of individuals and supports that individuals and their experiences are valuable" (Kumral, 2014, p. 525), which guarantees the possibility to empower students to change the whole society through education.

Both Reconstructionism and Progressivism advocate each student's uniqueness and assets should be valued. Teachers play the role of facilitators, who create educational environments to satisfy students' interests and needs to achieve student-centered educational process (Kumral, 2014). Harris (2010) discovered in his research that teachers hold diverse understandings toward engaging students in class. One focus is to develop students' skills through various designed activities. Combining relatively challenging activities with meaningful learning is a fundamental prerequisite to achieve student engagement. A teacher should not look only at students' behavioral outcomes. Instead, achieving meaningful learning through engagement in activities should be the ultimate goal. The learning environment needs to be under both the teacher and students' control, without wasting time and discipline problems. Highly structured activities satisfy students' needs from different levels.

Gary (1984) argues that knowledge is the state of knowing, people gain both from extensive learning and personal experiences. Roberson & Woody (2012) believe that meaningful learning occurs where "problem-solving methods, scientific inquiry, and reflective thinking are met in cooperative and individual learning situations" (p. 210), and satisfies "the variability in classroom experiences, instructional situations, and instructional materials, including resources outside the classroom" (p. 210). Therefore, learning is not an accumulation of knowledge, but achieved by using and experimenting with personal experiences (Penner, 1995).

Roorda et al. (2011) confirm that students' satisfaction with the needs for relatedness, needs for competence, and needs for autonomy can motivate their engagement in learning which is based on the self-system theory and the self-determination theory. Various research studies discovered similar results. Harris (2010) depicts that the highest engagement happens when "tasks were challenging, instruction was relevant, and the students felt in control of the learning

environment" (p. 133). Fredricks et al. (2004) concluded that "teacher support, positive teacher-student relationships, classroom structure, autonomy support and authentic and challenging tasks have been associated with student engagement at the classroom level" (van Uden et al., 2014, p. 22). Huang (2010) identifies that successful English teachers depend on their English language proficiency, language-teaching skills, interpersonal communication ability, and personality traits. Therefore, affective teacher-student relationships, pedagogical practices, and instructors' dispositions are the three main themes that enhance student engagement inside the classroom.

**Affective Teacher-Student Relationships**. Strong student-instructor relationships highly correlate with and enhance student engagement (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Frisby & Myers, 2008; Klem & Connell, 2004; Muller, 2001; Roorda et al., 2011; van Uden et al., 2014), and they significantly affect students' educational outcomes (Astin, 1993; Frisby & Myers, 2008; Roorda et al., 2011). Interpersonal teacher-student relationship is "a product of the interaction of teacher and student behavior over time" (Hagenauer et al., 2015, p. 387). Interpersonal teacher behaviors are the most important factor to predicting students' engagement inside the classroom (van Uden et al., 2014). Frisby and Myers (2008) surveyed 281 undergraduate students and found out students' frequency of class participation correlates positively with enjoyably personal interaction with the teacher. At the same time, student engagement can be enhanced by fostering positive interpersonal relationship with students (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Klem &Connell, 2004; Muller, 2001).

The classroom is the primary micro-context where the teacher and students interact. It forms its own unique classroom emotional climate (CEC) through the quality of social and emotional interactions in it. A classroom with high CEC features: (a) teachers who are sensitive to students' needs, (b) warm, caring, nurturing, and congenial teacher-student relationships, (c)

teachers who value students' perspectives, and (d) no sarcasm and harsh disciplinary practices inside the classroom (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012). Students are more likely to be engaged in high CEC classrooms (Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007; Skinner, 1990).

The construct of rapport is used to demonstrate the positive student-instructor relationship, which is defined as "an overall feeling between two people encompassing a mutual, trusting and prosocial bond" (Frisby & Martin, 2010, p. 147). Positive interactions between a teacher and students paves the way to a positive relationship. Communication, especially initiated by the professor, fosters positive student-instructor relationships (Sher, 2009). The strategies include providing individualized feedback to students (Sher, 2009) and communication outside the classroom (Frisby & Martin, 2010).

Nadler & Nadler (2001) define out-of-class communication (OCC) as "interactions outside the formal classroom that may be initiated by students or faculty. It includes advising, students seeking out faculty to ask questions about class content, faculty involvement in student organizations, and/or student-faculty discussions about non-class related issues" (p. 242). The importance of OCC includes informal contact among students and the instructor that increases verbal and nonverbal rapport (Dobransky & Frymier, 2004; Jaasma & Koper, 1999). Furthermore, research studies indicate that communication outside the classroom highly correlates with students' learning motivation (Jaasma & Koper, 1999) and students' learning and engagement (Frisby & Martin, 2010). Building a positive student-instructor relationship is a prerequisite to engaging students inside the classroom.

**Pedagogical Practices**. The first and foremost role a teacher plays in an engaged classroom is a manager and an organizer (Yan, 2012). A teacher is responsible for organizing all kinds of effective class activities including role plays, group discussions, and presentations that

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are suitable for students' needs and interests. Meanwhile, teachers are responsible to explain the significance, procedures, and expectations for class activities (Harmer, 2007). Furthermore, teachers provide students with clear instruction for the tasks (Alonazi, 2017). Teachers also play multiple roles to promote students' engagement, such as resource (Gardner & Miller, 2002; Yan, 2012), counselor (Voller, 1997; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997), and facilitator (Alonazi, 2017; Hua, 2001).

Generally speaking, the pedagogical practices that can engage students inside the classroom are the ones consistent with the six principles of good teaching posited by Ramsden (2013):

> a high level of interest in and explanation of their discipline; concern and respect for students and student learning; using appropriate assessment and feedback; providing clear goals and intellectual challenge to the students; promoting independence, control and active engagement in the classroom; and a willingness to learn from students taking their course. (Exeter et al., 2010, p. 772)

Two elements should be involved to engage students inside the classroom: the teacher provides course content that engages students' attention, and students engage with the course content (Mcgroarty et al., 2004). Obviously, fulfilling students' engagement inside the classroom requires contributions from both the teacher and the students.

Smith, Sheppard, Johnson, & Johnson (2005) state that cooperative learning and problem-based learning are good classroom-based pedagogical practices to enhance undergraduate student engagement. Colonel Francis Parker and John Dewey are advocates of cooperative learning (Smith et al., 2005). Cooperative learning requires students' "carefully structured individual accountability" (Smith et al., 2005, p. 88). Smith et al. (2005) emphasize

the benefits of cooperative learning and problem-based learning by citing from Mckeachie, Pintrich, Yi-Guang, & Smith (1986):

> Student participation, teacher encouragement, and student-student interaction positively relate to improved critical thinking. These three activities confirm other research and theory stressing the importance of active practice, motivation, and feedback in thinking skills as well as other skills. This confirms that discussions are superior to lectures in improving thinking and problem solving. (p. 92)

Problem-based learning requires students to work together toward solving a problem they have never seen before. Students work in small groups to accomplish shared goals that are not only beneficial to all the other group members but also to themselves. During the process of formulating and solving the problem, students actively develop their analytical skills and construct knowledge.

Witkowski & Cornell (2015) discovered that collaborative activities, such as team-based learning (TBL), help students understand the content better and motivate them to learn more. Mennenga (2013) surveyed 143 participants and identified that students in a TBL course are more engaged than those students in traditional classes. Students benefit from collaboration with each other, especially due to the large class sizes in China. During the limited class period, group activities allow more engagement than pair work or individual work. Meanwhile, mixed-ability grouping with students of different English levels guarantees better understanding and promotes expression. In a group discussion, the stress-free environment among students minimizes English speaking anxiety.

Witkowski and Cornell (2015) employed peer coaching approaches to analyze student engagement during their class activities. Results denote that a majority of students felt that the

collaborative class activities helped and motivated them to learn more about the teaching content. The specific classroom activities used in their study included: debate team carousel (Himmele & Himmele, 2011), group quizzes (Yokomoto & Ware, 1997), chalkboard splash (Himmele & Himmele, 2011), conceptual workshop (Finkel & Elbow, 2000), three-sentence wrap-up (Himmele & Himmele, 2011), and similes (Himmele & Himmele, 2011).

The commonality of these collaborative class activities is that they belong to the model of "high cognition/ high participation" in Himmele & Himmele's (2017) Total Participation Techniques (TPT) cognitive engagement model and quadrant analysis (See Figure 1). The four quadrants are "low cognition/low participation (1), low cognition/high participation (2), high cognition/low participation (3), and high cognition/high participation (4)" (p. 17). Class activities that fit into Quadrant 4 are the ones that help students to actively participate in learning and develop their higher-order thinking (Himmele & Himmele, 2017).

**Figure 1:** *TPT Cognitive Engagement Model and Quadrant Analysis*
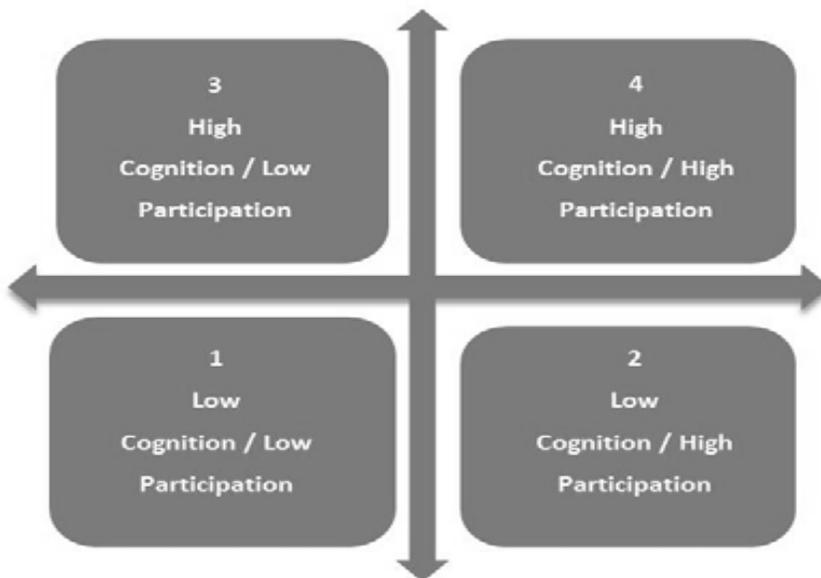


*Figure 1.* TPT Cognitive Engagement Model and Quadrant Analysis. Reprinted from "An investigation into student engagement in higher education classrooms," by P. Witkowski, & T. Cornell, 2015, *A Journal of Scholarly Teaching, 10,* p.57.

**Instructor Dispositions**. Dispositions refer to "the tendency or propensity to respond in specific ways to particular circumstances" (Eberly, Rand, & O'Connor, 2007, p. 31). Perkins, Jay, & Tishman (1993) identified three components of disposition: inclination, sensitivity, and ability. Inclination is the felt tendency to do a particular behavior. Sensitivity refers to the alertness towards this behavior. Ability is the capability to actually follow through with that behavior. As to dispositions in the educational field, there is no widespread standard definition, application, nor measurement. Lilian Katz (1993) argues that "the attractiveness of the concept disposition appears to lie precisely in this ambiguity and inconsistency" (Freeman, 2007a, p. 15), which spur exploration to discover how much better a teacher can be.

The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) revised and explained the definition of "disposition" in its glossary in 2002 as:

> The values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities and affect student learning, motivation and development as well as the educator's own professional growth. Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice. For example, they might include a belief that all students can learn, a vision of high and challenging standards, or a commitment to a safe and supportive learning environment. (p. 52)

The construct of dispositions includes "perceptions about self, perceptions about others, perceptions about subject field, perceptions about the purpose of education and the process of education, and a general frame of reference perception" (Cummins & Asempapa, 2013, p. 99). Researchers emphasize various aspects of dispositions, including patterns of behaviors, cognitive tendencies, habit of mind, values, and attitudes (Thornton, 2006). Without explicit standards in

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teachers' dispositions, different schools propose their own ethical standards and working guidelines. Value shapes teachers' pedagogical practices and interpersonal behaviors, which in turn affect the learning experiences of students.

Implementing pedagogies of engagement means a teacher values and respects individual differences, positive human interactions, collaborative and cooperative work (Freeman, 2007b). It also means the teacher values flexibility and reciprocity in the teaching process, embracing students' critical thinking, problem solving abilities, and performance capabilities (Freeman, 2007b). The teacher's role shifts from knowledge imparter to a learning process designer and facilitator. Former University of Michigan President, James Duderstadt (1999) underscores a teacher's role, "It could well be that faculty members of the twenty-first century college or university will find it necessary to set aside their roles as teachers and instead become designers of learning experiences, processes, and environments" (p. 7).

The ability of reflection is another disposition that differentiates the very best teachers. Van Manen (1977) analyzed reflection through three levels. The fundamental level of reflection is technical reflection, which refers to "the technical application of educational knowledge and of basic curriculum principles for the purpose of attaining a given end" (van Manen, 1977, p. 206). In this level, teachers focus on practical teaching methods. The next level is "analyzing and clarifying individual and cultural experiences, meanings, perceptions, assumptions, prejudgments, and presuppositions for the purpose of orienting practical actions" (van Manen, 1977, p. 206). A teacher with this level of reflective ability connects theory into action and is concerned with teaching pedagogy and students' learning results. The highest level of reflection is called critical reflection, which requires a teacher to look beyond the specific curriculum to a broader context, like teaching equity, morals, and ethnicity, and social change and reconstruction

(van Manen, 1977). The disposition of reflective ability leads to the teaching from content-based, low level thinking education to a practical knowledge-based, high level thinking education.

## Student Engagement in English Classes in China

Halpin (2014) observed classes irrespective of subject matter and school phases in several elite schools in China and summarized "interactive whole class teaching" as a prevalent pedagogy among Chinese teachers. This kind of pedagogy disavows individualized study and encourages students work on the same single task simultaneously. The teacher deploys various ways to ask questions, handle answers, explain definitions, demonstrate process, and provoke ideas. These techniques are suitable for large class sizes with seats in rows.

Halpin (2014) argues that the interactive whole class teaching can be inspiring and interesting, rather than causing students' disinterest and disengagement. But students still suffer anonymity in the learning process. The crux to fully achieve a student-centered, engaging classroom is how teachers satisfy students' psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, especially in the context of Chinese culture and its educational history.

### Barriers to Achieve Student Engagement

**Characteristics of Chinese Students**. McKay and Tom (1999) argue that second language learners will be influenced by their previous language learning experiences, that also bring expectations of how language classes should be organized and taught. Chinese students are used to teacher-directed interactive whole class teaching pedagogy after twelve years' education from elementary school to high school (Haplin, 2014). Being influenced by Confucian concepts of learning and experiences of teacher-centered classes, Chinese students are less likely to reveal their opinions (Wang & Wang, 2003). Thus, their silence in the classroom is a typical

phenomenon, which discourages professors who encourage discourse to exchange ideas. Silence in a classroom is easily misunderstood as a negative communication behavior in classroom participation, which results from either unwillingness or inability to speak up in class. The reality is that although most Chinese students may be silent in the classroom, they are engaged through active listening (Liu, 2002).

Engaged listening demonstrates respect to both the instructor and classmates in Chinese culture (Liu, 2002). Instead of raising questions in a timely manner, students are encouraged to ask questions in private later to save the precious time in class for the whole class due to the large class size and pressure from high stake examinations (Liu, 2002). Meng & Onwuegbuzie (2015) explain that, "a collectivist culture in China might be more in favor of the collectivist good" (p. 337), which means individual students can sacrifice their personal interests to meet the collective goal in Chinese culture. Flaitz (2003) ascribes the collectivism rather than individual identity to the ethnically homogeneous society China is. Meanwhile, the Chinese saying "The empty cart squeaks loudest" indicates opinionated or excessively verbal behaviors are not appropriate in class (Liu, 2002).

Face-saving strategy also explains why most Chinese students keep silent in class. Students without proficient English refuse to demonstrate their weakness in public to save face, that is referenced as "*mianzi*" and "*lian*." Liu (2002) depicted that "*Mianzi* refers to prestige and reputation, *Lian* stands for the respect of the group for a person with a good moral reputation" (p. 40). Embedded within collectivism, Chinese students think highly of self-image within the group. Fear of negative evaluation from both teachers and students are associated with face saving, which also contributes to English speaking-in-class anxiety, which in turn influences students' attitudes towards English learning (Mak, 2011).

Speaking-in-class anxiety certainly impedes students from participating in classes. Mak (2011) explains that "insufficient time for preparation before speaking in class, being corrected in class, and not being allowed to use the L1" (p. 203) may cause students' anxieties. According to Chinese culture, "Think twice before acting" and "A shut mouth catches no flies" are the rules guiding behavior. Chinese students need enough time to cogitate and be well prepared before taking any action to keep their positive self-images in class.

Students' motivation in learning determines their engagement in classes. To most college students, the first year in university or college is a big transition since they come from various social, economic and academic backgrounds. Released from intense study in high school and their parents' supervision, undergraduate students rejoice after completing the National College Entrance Examinations (NCEE), suddenly relaxed, and often temporarily lose focus on learning (Zhang et al., 2015). Therefore, student engagement depends on self-motivation and self-discipline.

Students' friendships and learning environments relate to Chinese students' study in a unique way (Zhang et al., 2015). The pursuit of harmoniousness in Chinese culture explains why student engagement inside the classroom is highly different from class to class. Even a small number of students who are active in class participation may stimulate the whole class's performance. But in a less engaged class, it is hard to see any specific students trying to change the learning environment. The Chinese saying "The lead bird gets shot" represents the reluctance for individuals to be either behave or act differently from the majority.

**Social Structure**. Social structure often prevents effective student engagement due to the hierarchical teacher-student relationships. One Confucian moral thought identified is father and son, which is hierarchical and bound by filial piety (Reagan, 2005). Chinese people believe that

"one day as your teacher, like a father for a lifetime" demonstrate students' respect toward teachers, which lays a boundary to student-instructor relationship building. Respect for elders and authority is paramount in Chinese culture (Flaitz, 2003). Students have been generally "socialized to conduct themselves — to defer largely to the authority and say-so of their elders" (Halpin, 2014, p. 2). Respect implies obedience and conflict avoidance. To sustain a teacher's authority, students are trained to respect, obey, and count upon the teacher (Penner, 1995). Questioning or negotiating with teachers on grades are not Chinese students' options to some extent. Thus, most students choose to stay anonymous, especially in the class setting, to avoid any negative impression or confrontation.

**Conceptions of Teaching and Learning**. The broader social and cultural contexts influence people's learning behaviors and development (Zhang et al., 2015). Whereas student-centered pedagogy is highly recommended in today's classrooms, the role of memorization and rote learning in content learning are still deeply rooted in China. Confucian tradition values Chinese traditional teaching and learning, which features the rote learning and memorization (Zhang & Liu, 2014). According to Bloom's Taxonomy, higher level thinking like analyzing, evaluating and creativity cannot be well cultivated by rote learning and memorization. Yet, Confucian tradition believes that the foundation for the development of higher-level thinking is set upon rote memorization. The benefits of drills and memorizations are described as:

> In Chinese tradition, the engaging of memorization in teaching and learning, actually offers layers of knowledge, learning processes, and more importantly exemplary classic models for teachers and learners alike. These form the very foundation for them to make the knowledge their own, develop their own creativity, and lead the people and the nation. (Xu, 2017, p. 446)

Exam results take priority over students' learning, which also leads to the adoption of traditional teaching methods in China (Yuan, 2017). An exam-oriented culture forces teachers to follow traditional teaching practices. Chinese people treat learning as a process for perfection. They view failure as shameful and feel guilty for failing their parents, which not only reflects on themselves but also on those who nurtured them. It is believed that the failure emanates from lack of diligence rather than aptitude or capability (Yin & Wang, 2016). Perfection can be demonstrated by academic performance, especially scores from high stake tests, rather than engagement in class. Thus, attaining high scores in their academic records are ultimate goals for both students and teachers. The examination results in College English Test (CET) and Test for English Majors (TEM) are the criteria to evaluate English teaching and learning in higher education in China. Therefore, Chinese students cherish the limited class period when they are exposed to the subject content lectured by teachers.

Very little research has been done to determine how student-centered communicative pedagogies are related to examination scores in China because the traditional teaching and learning are still valued and employed by Confucian supporters (Hu, 2002, 2003, 2005; Penner, 1995; Wen, 2016). Both teachers and parents still hold the view that the success of learning English depends on rote memorization of what is taught by the teachers and the textbooks (Wang, 1999; Zhu, 2003). Therefore, teacher-centered intensive reading is still a popular teaching method in universities and colleges currently (Liu, 2018; Wen, 2016).

Chinese deductive thinking leads to direct transmission and absorption of knowledge (Halpin, 2014). English has been taught in China through the grammatical approach for decades, which is described as "deductive language instruction" whereby "students learn the rules and patterns of the second language as a means of learning the language" (Herrera & Murry, 2016,

p.189). The three methods under the grammatical approach are: Grammar-Translation method, Direct method, and Audiolingual method (Herrera & Murry, 2016). Reading, writing, and grammar are emphasized in the Grammar-Translation method. Direct method characterizes in the immersion of the target language. The Audiolingual method uses repetitive practices and constant error correction to increase language competence. Generally speaking, the underlying idea of the grammatical approach is learning English through memorizing grammar rules and sentence patterns with a lot of drills, which perfectly matches the requirements on paper-based high stakes English tests in China.

**Professional Teaching Dispositions**. A teacher's rapport with students is the affective foundation to the success of student engagement (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Frisby & Myers, 2008; Roorda et al., 2011; van Uden et al., 2014). Dispositions of love, caring, trust, and empathy are critical to the success of student-instructor relationships, which will affect student engagement. Yet, a common complaint from undergraduate students in China is that their teachers are not easily contactable or approachable (Gan, Humphreys, & Hamp-Lyons, 2004). What is more, an ideal teacher is supposed to be harsh, reserved, authoritative, and demanding under Confucian eyes in China. A Chinese saying "Only outstanding students were brought up by strict teachers" vividly portrays the ideal image of teachers in China. In ancient China, teachers would physically punish students by beating their palms with a ruler when they failed to meet expectations. This traditional stereotype impedes teachers from building positive relationships with students.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a comprehensive literature review of the history, pedagogical practices, and existing problems of English education at colleges and universities in China. It then illustrated the definition of student engagement, which necessitates the fulfillment of

student-centered teaching. Finally, it pointed to the importance of student engagement and how to foster it inside classrooms through affective student-instructor relationships, pedagogical practices, and instructor dispositions under the guidance of Self-Determination Theory. Since this study was situated in China and most research studies regarding student engagement were conducted in the United States, this chapter also presented four barriers to Chinese students' engagement inside classrooms: Chinese students' characteristics, social structure, conceptions of teaching and learning, and professional teaching dispositions.

# Chapter 3 - METHODOLOGY

This study focused on students' emotional engagement through their relationship building with teachers, which led to behavioral and cognitive engagement. The interpersonal teacher-student relationship predicts students' engagement in learning (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004; Roorda et al., 2011) and teachers' emotional experiences in class (Hagenauer et al., 2015). A large-scale correlational study (Astin, 1993) sampled 27,064 students at 309 institutions and pointed to two factors — interaction among students and interaction between faculty and students — as the most influential factors in students' academic improvement, personal development, and satisfaction at school. Frisby & Myers (2008) define rapport as "the ability to build a relationship based on trust and harmony," and they further testify the correlational relationship that "when instructors are perceived as establishing rapport with their students, students report that they participate in class and they report gains in their affective learning, motivation, and satisfaction" (p. 30). Therefore, the framework of this study started from the students' relationship with teachers and went on to further explore corresponding pedagogical practices that engage students inside the classroom.

Zhang et al. (2015) argue that broader sociocultural context also impacts students' learning, so this study was confined to English teaching to non-English majors in higher education in China. Guskey (2002) confirms that personal philosophy of teaching determines pedagogical practices and interactional behaviors in the classroom. Therefore, the assumption is that individual instructor's perceptions toward student engagement influences their interpersonal behaviors and pedagogical practices. In turn, positive interpersonal relationships with students foster their engagement in learning.

There are limited research studies focusing on teachers' perspective toward student engagement in English classes at the undergraduate level. Thus, this study explored it in the context of Chinese higher education at the classroom level through the lenses guided by Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The purpose was to discover how English teachers motivate and engage students by meeting students' psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness through affective student-instructor relationship building, pedagogical practices, and instructor dispositions. The Kansas State University Institutional Review Board granted approval for this study (See Appendix A).

This study was designed to address two research questions:

1. What are the experiences of the four Chinese instructors of English as they engaged students in classes?

2. What are the experiences of the four Chinese instructors of English regarding their relationship building with students?

## Subjectivity Story

Peshkin (1994) discusses the ubiquity of subjectivity when people conduct research as three interrelated aspects of human beings: affective state of self, personal history, and biography, which function simultaneously and continuously. Based on individual personal sociocultural background and paradigm, researchers make various choices and see the world differently. Thus, I believe it is necessary to share my own subjectivity story to start.

When I first learned English in middle school in China, I followed the English teacher's rules: read the English words first, memorize the spellings, read dialogues and articles in the textbook, and then recite all the sentences. Reading and writing were the essential themes in English classes from that point forward. Classes repeated this routine day in and day out. At that

time, I did not have a single chance to meet any native English speakers. Thus, I did not need to communicate in English. What I needed to do was earn high scores on the examination because higher grades on the examination were what my parents, teachers, and the whole Chinese society expected from me. Vocabulary and grammar rules were the keys to successful completion of any assessment. I was the only one who contributed to my English learning, and the teacher provided no interesting class activities that engaged me with other students to make learning fun. In retrospect, I was taught by a typical teacher-centered Grammar-Translation method.

A decade later, I became an English teacher in a private university in the central part of China. My first year of teaching was a nightmare. Even I was tired of the routine of my teaching: vocabularies, sentences, and articles. I played the role of the information giver in class, and students behaved as passive information receivers. I deliberately built my professional credentials to keep my distance from the students. Fatigue, reluctance, and failure surfaced as the main themes for my first year of teaching.

Three years later, I returned to China after two years of a master's degree program in the United States. I suddenly became a popular teacher and received the "excellence in teaching award" constantly. I contribute all the honor for this award to the rapport that I built with my students and the increase of their engagement in my class. I knew at that point that researching about student engagement and building student-instructor relationships was my passion. The results of this study will benefit teachers who are struggling with students' engagement in their classes in China.

Kim (2015) asserts that, "subjective means giving personal meaning to a phenomenon, acknowledging that each human individual has his or her own outlook on reality shaped by his or her own experience" (p. 55). I am the center of knowing during the research process, and it is me

who gives meaning to my observation of the world based on my personal experience. Peshkin (1988, 1994) states that subjectivity is the garment that cannot be removed, and it is present all the time. Subjectivity has the capacity to lead me to make choices as a researcher, which makes the research meaningful. My focus is to gain deep and full understanding on the participants' perceptions and implementation regarding English teaching within Chinese culture.

Peshkin (1988) states, "I think we all are – and unavoidably belong: in the subjective underbrush of our own research experience" (p. 20). My experiences affect my perceptions toward student engagement and relationship building with students. I assume that the rapport between instructor and students can increase students' engagement in class, which is reciprocal. This subjective statement demonstrates the experiences that I have had and that shaped my methodological framework, research design, data collection methods, and data analysis of this study.

## Rationale for Qualitative Study

One purpose of qualitative research is to understand someone's experiences, which ultimately results in an in-depth understanding (Patton, 2015). My study was designed to understand the experiences of engaging students in English classes from teachers' perspectives, and to discover which pedagogical practices best complemented student engagement in English learning. Patton (2015) explains the implication of qualitative research in detail:

Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting – what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what is going on for them, what their meanings are, what the

world looks like in that particular setting – and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting. … The analysis strives for depth of understanding. (p. 1)

According to Patton (2015), qualitative research emphasizes the uniqueness of individuals' experiences and their subjective understandings. The purpose of this study is not for general results, but to invoke deep understanding of the participants' teaching experiences within Chinese culture. Guided by constructivism, education should be considered as a process and school as a lived experience (Merriam, 1998). Thus, to understand how participants understand their unique interaction with students embedded in Chinese culture context, how they analyze their pedagogical practices and define the success of student engagement in class can be fulfilled by qualitative study design. The significance of this study also lies in demonstrating to English teachers in China that fostering student engagement inside classrooms is essential.

## Methodological Framework

Constructive-based inquiry case study was the methodology of this qualitative research study. Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills (2017) summarize that the method of case study originated in social science from the 1940s for describing a specific phenomenon. It has grown in sophistication and become a valid inquiry of complex issues within a specific cultural environment.

Case studies "concentrate attention on the way particular groups of people confront specific problems, taking a holistic view of the situation" (Shaw, 1978, p. 2). In my study, the four participants were facing the problem of engaging Chinese students in their English classes. In exploring their perceptions of student engagement exhaustively, it was vital to consider that the students they were confronting were embedded in the Chinese higher educational

atmosphere. The study facilitated deeper understandings about the four participants' pedagogical practices and philosophies about teaching and learning.

Patton (2015) summarizes "a case for a study is the necessity of placing a boundary around some phenomenon of interest" (p. 259). Each participant in this study was defined as a case. The four participants made this study eligible to be a multiple case study, which involves effectively testing a theory by observing the results of multiple cases and generalizing the results from multiple cases (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). In comparing the similarities and differences among the four cases, the data assist in understanding their perceptions and actions, which leads to exhaustive closure on how to build rapport with students and encourage students to engage in English classes within the context of Chinese culture.

Case studies are commonly utilized in qualitative research to "target at information-rich sources for in-depth understanding" and "answer focused questions with in-depth inquiries" (Bhattacharya, 2007, p. 92). The data of my study were collected through student surveys, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, class observations, and self-reflective journals. The variety of data collection guaranteed the richness of data and enhanced the depth of inquiry.

## Research Design

This multiple case study was designed to explore and understand the Chinese English teachers' experiences in relationship building with students, and pedagogical practices to engage students in class. Creswell, Hanson, Clark, and Morales (2007) state:

> In a collective or multiple-case study, the researcher again selects one issue or concern but also selects multiple case studies to illustrate the issue. The researcher might select several programs from several research sites or multiple programs within a single site.

Often, the inquirer purposefully selects multiple cases to show different perspectives on the issue. (p. 247)

Purposeful sampling was the methodology used to select the participants. Merriam (1998) explains "purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 61). Chinese instructors of English with a high record in teaching evaluation and who fostered high student engagement in class were the potential candidates for this study. The following steps led the participant selection phase as the researcher:

1. Contacted the Deans of the College of Foreign Languages in each university and received recommendations of five candidates from each university based on highly effective teaching evaluations from 2015 to 2017.

2. Gained candidates' permission to survey their students on student-instructor relationship and student engagement.

3. Based on mean scores in the survey, invited two instructors in each school with the highest scores to participate as participants. If any instructor declined the invitation, the next teacher was invited based on the rankings of mean scores.

In this study, the first language of the participants was Mandarin, but the findings were published in English. The issues of language choice and translation occurred during the process of data collection, transcription, data analysis, and writing up. To guarantee the clarity of understanding and quality of the response, the participants were allowed to decide which language they were more comfortable with while engaging in the interviews. All the contents were translated and presented in English in the final writing.

**Participant Selection**

It would have been ideal to reach more English instructors to gather their perceptions on engaging students in class and on relationship building with the students. Nevertheless, due to the constraints of time and energy, only four Chinese instructors of English were selected: two instructors taught at a private university and the other two taught in a public university.

Both of the universities were located in Zhengzhou, the provincial capital of Henan Province. Henan is located in the central part of China, which is the birthplace of Chinese civilization by straddling the Yellow River. Zhengzhou City covers 7,657 square kilometers, and it is China's most populous capital city and the transport hub of China. The statistics from Henan Statistics Bureau indicate that Zhengzhou City had a population of 9,569,000 inhabitants in 2017. According to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China in 2017, there were 25 universities in Zhengzhou.

The public school mentioned in this study was Zhengzhou University, an elite national university designated as a 211project institution by the Ministry of Education in China. This comprehensive university is a four-campus system with more than 55,000 undergraduate students, 15,000 graduate students, and proximately 1,800 international students. This university offers both graduate and undergraduate programs within 42 schools/departments.

The private school in this study was Sias International University, an American-owned university, and it is well-known for its educational partnership with universities abroad and the involvement of full-time international teachers. There are around 135 international teachers teaching oral English to all the undergraduates. This school offers undergraduate programs in 35 majors to its current 27,150 on-campus students. It enjoys partnership with more than one hundred universities in 35 countries.

In China public universities and private universities vary in the composition of their student bodies. The crucial requirement for college admission is completion of the National College Entrance Examinations. Generally speaking, students in a public school receive higher scores on the National College Entrance Examinations than the ones who study in a private university in China. The total score in the National College Entrance Examinations in 2017 was 750. According to the statistics from the Ministry of Education in China, the score for college admission to Zhengzhou University was 150 points higher than Sias International University in 2017. Teachers are theoretically required to adopt different teaching methods based on students' prior knowledge base.

In the pre-selection phase, the Deans of College of Foreign Languages in these two universities were contacted. Based on the past three years' teaching evaluation scores, the top five instructors in each school were the preselected candidates. Then, an email (Appendix B) was sent to the ten candidates to gain permission to conduct a survey with their students to evaluate students' perceptions of their engagement and relationship with the instructor.

Students were requested to fill out a questionnaire (Appendix D) to evaluate student-instructor relationship and student engagement after signing the informed consent form (Appendix C). The questionnaire was a combination of *Modified Rapport Measure* (Table 1) and *Student Engagement Scale* (Table 2). *The Modified Rapport Measure* (Table 1) in Frisby & Martin (2010) was utilized to test students' relationship with the instructor, which was an adaption of Gremler and Gwinner's (2000). There were eleven 5-point Likert-type scale questions, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Six items in the scale measured enjoyable interaction (e.g., In thinking about my relationship with my instructor, I enjoy interacting with her/him); the other five items measured personal connection (e.g., I

strongly care about my instructor). An internal reliability was reported by Gremler and Gwinner

from .93 to .96. Frisby & Martin (2010) reported the internal reliability for their instrument

was .94.

**Table 1**: *Modified Rapport Measure*

<div style="border:1px solid black">

1. In thinking about my relationship with my instructor, I enjoy interacting with her/him.
2. My instructor creates a feeling of "warmth" in our relationship.
3. My instructor relates well to me.
4. In thinking about this relationship, I have a harmonious relationship with my instructor.
5. My instructor has a good sense of humor.
6. I am comfortable interacting with my instructor.
7. I feel like there is a "bond" between my instructor and myself.
8. I look forward to seeing my instructor in class.
9. I strongly care about my instructor.
10. My instructor has taken a personal interest in me.
11. I have a close relationship with my instructor.

</div>

*Note.* Modified rapport measure. Adapted from "Instructor-student and student-student rapport in

the classroom," by B. N. Frisby, & M. M. Martin, 2010, *Communication Education, 59*(2), p.

153.

   *The Modified Student Engagement Scale* (Table 2) designed in Alsowat's (2016) study

was employed in this questionnaire. There were nineteen 5-point Likert-type scale questions,

ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The reliability of this student

engagement scale is .86 (Alsowat, 2016).

**Table 2:** *Modified Student Engagement Scale*

1. This class is more engaging than traditional classroom instruction.
2. This class gives me greater opportunities to communicate with other students.
3. I feel that this class has improved my English.
4. I am more motivated to learn English in this class.
5. I listen attentively to the instructor during class.
6. I ask questions in the classroom.
7. I enjoy learning new things in class.
8. When we work on something in class, I feel encouraged.
9. I talk about the course material with others outside of class.
10. I ask myself questions to make sure I know the material that I have been studying.
11. I think about how I can utilize the course material in everyday life.
12. When I have a class project, I plan out how I am going to do it.
13. I pay attention in class.
14. I participate during class discussions by sharing my thoughts/opinions.
15. When I read the lesson, I ask myself questions to make sure I understand what it is about.
16. The tests in my class do a good job of measuring what I am able to do.
17. In my class, I do more than required.
18. I enjoy discussing topics with my peers.
19. The class makes me want to learn more about English.

*Note.* Modified student engagement scale. Adapted from "An EFL flipped classroom teaching model: Effects on English language higher-order thinking skills, student engagement and satisfaction," by H. Alsowat, *Journal of Education and Practice, 7*(9), p. 121.

Two instructors with the highest mean scores in the survey in each university were prioritized as the participants in this study. According to Chinese culture, face-to-face communication is the best way to invite people to participate in a study. Therefore, individual appointments were arranged with the instructors in succession to request them to participate in this study. One instructor declined the offer and was unable to participate, the next instructor was invited based on the ranking of mean survey scores. The purpose and objectives of this study, the length of this study, and their roles during the process were outlined to the participants in person. Upon acceptance, the instructors signed the consent form (Appendix E) to agree officially to take part in the study.

**Research Sites**

The research sites of this study were tangible. There were three two-hour class observations for each participant within one month, once a week. The observation was implemented in authentic English classes. The participants were requested ahead of time to determine when they would like to be observed, and they were asked to employ pedagogical practices to engage students in class when being observed.

For each participant, two informal conversations and two one-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted. The aim of the first informal conversation at the beginning of study was to gain a glimpse of the participants' personal educational background, teaching philosophies, and attitudes towards students' engagement in class and student instructor relationship. The next informal conversation was at the end of the study, focusing on our reflective questions and thoughts about this study. The one-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted at the agreed-upon time and place and guided by interview protocol, which included some probing questions (Appendix F).

**Researcher Positionality**

I was privileged to conduct this study because I treated myself both as an insider and an outsider. With years of teaching experiences in China, I assumed that it would be easier for me to resonate with the participants than those who do not have teaching experiences in China. Besides the resonance in teaching experiences, I also shared similar culture with the participants. Communicating in the same language enabled me to gain accurate information from them. Yet, I was still an outsider to them because we have different personal experiences. The binary insider and outsider roles also showed up in the data collection phase.

For the semi-structured interviews, my insider role was to design probing open-ended questions and be actively involved in our conversation. I appreciated participants' contribution, respected their thoughts, and was always "respectful, nonjudgmental, and nonthreatening" (Merriam, 1998, p. 85). In building rapport with the participants and gaining deep thoughts from the participants, I actively engaged in our conversation and shared my insights with them because "participants enjoy sharing their expertise with an interested and sympathetic listener" (Merriam, 1998, p. 85). During class observations, I was the outsider and just recorded what I had observed without engaging in any activities in class.

## Data Collection

To get a holistic understanding of participants' experiences, the data were collected through student surveys, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, class observations, and reflective journals. Table 3 is the data inventory of this study.

**Table 3**: *Data Inventory*

| Data | Pages | Pages in Total |
|---|---|---|
| Student Surveys | 50-65 pages for each of the 4 participants | 235 pages |
| Informal Conversations | 3-5 pages each communication, 2 times each person | 34 pages |
| Semi-Structured One-Hour Interviews | 10-15 pages each interview, 2 interviews each person | 96 pages |
| Two-Hour Class Observations | 3-5 pages each time, 3 two-hour observations each person | 50 pages |
| Reflective Journals | 3-5 pages each journal, 4 journals | 17 pages |
| Total | | 432 pages |

**Informal Conversation**

Two informal conversations were conducted with each participant, at the outset and the end of the study. Informal conversation allowed free communication with the participants, either to solve uncertainty in understanding and provoke deeper discussion or to build rapport and trust with each other. At the beginning, informal conversation helped me learn about participants including their educational background, teaching experiences, teaching philosophy, and personal characteristics. The second informal conversation focused on their perspectives, concerns, and feedback regarding this study. Speaking in English or Chinese was determined by the participants' comfortability. All participants decided to speak in Chinese, but the direct quotes from the subjects were translated into English for analysis.

**Semi-Structured Interview**

After the first and the third class observations of each participant, the first and second semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants at the agreed-upon time and place. To increase the reliability and validity of the questions being asked, twenty guided questions (Table 4) were employed that had been revised from other studies — Chiu (2009) (Q2, Q4, Q6, Q7, Q10, Q15, Q16, and Q17), Dolezal, Welsh, Pressley, and Vincent (2013) (Q1, Q3, Q8, Q9, Q11, Q12, Q13, Q18, and Q19), Harris (2010) (Q14), and Witkowski & Cornell (2015) (Q5). These questions (Appendix F) related to teachers' teaching philosophy (Q1-Q4), student-centered teaching (Q5-Q9), learning community (Q10-Q12), student engagement (Q13-Q15), student-instructor interactions and student-student interactions (Q16-Q19).

**Table 4**: *Questions in Semi-Structured Interviews*

| No. | Interview Questions |
| --- | --- |
| 1 | What is the best thing about teaching English? |
| 2 | What is your fundamental belief of teaching and learning in your English language classroom? |
| 3 | What are your specific goals in your English classes? |
| 4 | What student behaviors are most valued in your English classes? |
| 5 | What do you think motivates the students to learn content materials from class the most? |
| 6 | How do you understand each individual student's needs as a whole person in a large class? |
| 7 | How do you adjust your teaching according to individual's needs in a large class? For example, how do you assist the struggling students? The above-average students? |
| 8 | What would you say are the top few challenges that you face as an English teacher in your particular school? |
| 9 | May we take a look at your planning book? Can you explain how you plan your lessons? |
| 10 | How do you build up a learning community for student-student and student-teacher interactions in which students are willing to speak English? |
| 11 | How do you feel that your students are doing in class? |
| 12 | What do you think gets in the ways of students' true learning? |
| 13 | Would you please tell me a story of a time when students were engaged in your class? |
| 14 | What specific strategies do you use to foster engagement in classes? |
| 15 | Is there any difficulty in encouraging students to engage in your class? If yes, what are the difficulties? |
| 16 | What strategies do you use to encourage student-instructor interactions? What are the barriers during the relationship building process if any? |
| 17 | What strategies do you use to encourage student-student interactions? What are the barriers in using such teaching strategies if any? |
| 18 | What class activities do the students seem to most enjoy? Why? |
| 19 | What class activities do the students seem to least enjoy? Why? |
| 20 | Is there anything else that you want to share with me regarding English teaching and student engagement? |

**Class Observation**

Kim (2015) explains the pitfall of the observer effect as influencing how participants behave and act in a research setting even though it is important to collect data in a natural setting. To minimize the observer's paradox, each participant was observed for a two-hour class period each week, a total of three times. The role of peripheral membership was played while observing in class. Bhattacharya (2007) defines peripheral membership in observation as one in which the observer does "not participate in any activities but documents what s/he observes from the sidelines" (p. 109). Merriam (1998) recommends the elements that can be observed in any setting includes the physical setting, the participants, activities and interactions, conversations, subtle factors, and the observer's own behavior.

The *Behavioral Engagement Related to Instruction (BERI) protocol* (Appendix G) was employed for field notes when conducting classroom observations (Lane & Harris, 2015, p. 86). Lane and Harris (2015) developed the BERI and tested it on seven courses with various instructors and pedagogy. The results indicated that BERI achieved interrater agreement in excess of 95% (Lane & Harris, 2015). An observation point was taken for every page of notes, and changes in classroom activities or instructor behaviors were recorded under each observation point (Lane & Harris, 2015). The notes of students' behavioral engagement were analyzed and recorded based on the guidelines from descriptions of student in-class behaviors that indicated they were engaged (Table 5) or disengaged (Table 6) (Lane & Harris, 2015, p. 85).

**Table 5**: *Descriptions of Student In-Class Engaged Behaviors*

| Engaged Behaviors | |
|---|---|
| Listening | Student is listening to lecture. Eye contact is focused on the instructor or activity and the students makes appropriate facial expressions, gestures, and posture shifts (i.e., smiling, nodding in agreement, leaning forward). |
| Writing | Student is taking notes on in-class material, the timing of which relates to the instructor's presentation or statements. |
| Reading | Student is reading material related to class. Eye contact is focused on and following the material presented in lecture or preprinted notes. When a question is posted in class, the student flips through their notes or text book. |
| Computer Use | Student is following along with lecture on computer or taking class notes on a word processor or on the presentation. Screen content matches lecture content. |
| Student Interaction | Student discussion relates to class material. Student verbal and nonverbal behavior indicates he or she is listening or explaining lecture content. Student is using hand gestures or pointing at notes or screen. |
| Interaction with Instructor | Student is asking or answering a question or participating in an in-class discussion. |

*Note.* Descriptions of student in-class engagement behaviors. Reprinted from "A new tool for measuring student behavioral engagement in large university classes," by E. S. Lane, & S. E. Harris, 2015, *Journal of College Science Teaching, 44*(6), p. 85.

**Table 6**: *Descriptions of Student In-Class Disengaged Behaviors*

| Disengaged Behaviors | |
|---|---|
| Settling in/ packing up | Student is unpacking, downloading class material, organizing notes, finding a seat, or packing up and leaving classroom. |
| Unresponsive | Student is not responsive to lecture. Eyes are closed or not focused on instructor or lecture material. Student is slouched or sleeping, and student's facial expressions are unresponsive to instructor's cues. |
| Off-task | Student is working on homework or studying for another course, playing with phone, listening to music, or reading non-class-related material. |
| Computer Use | Student is surfing web, playing game, chatting online, checking e-mail. |
| Student Interaction | Student discussion does not relate to class material. |
| Distracted by another student | Student is observing other student(s) and is distracted by an off-task conversation or by another student's computer or phone. |

*Note.* Descriptions of student in-class disengagement behaviors. Reprinted from "A new tool for measuring student behavioral engagement in large university classes," by E. S. Lane, & S. E. Harris, 2015, *Journal of College Science Teaching, 44*(6), p. 85.

**Reflective Journal**

Ortlipp (2008) confirms that self-reflective journals "facilitate reflexivity," and "examine personal assumptions and goals and clarify individual beliefs systems and subjectivities" (p. 695). Subjectivity is the center of qualitative research, and I recorded my reflective thoughts continuously to function as a data source to analyze inductively. The reflective journals captured my instantaneous reflection and enabled me to think from different angles. I reflected not only during the data analysis phase, but it also enabled me to dig deeper into my thoughts during the data collection phase.

## Data Management and Data Analysis

Research data were stored both electronically and physically. Four separate password-protected files under participants' pseudonyms were created to keep their data private. Meanwhile, the software for qualitative data analysis, NVivo, served as a data management software, as well as tracked data processing.

The first step in data analysis was coding, which is the transitional process of reducing data into semantic units of meaning in order to construct the relationship among various data sources (Saldana, 2009). To each semi-structured interview, In Vivo Coding was applied to analyze the raw data, which derived "from the actual language of the participants" (Saldana, 2009, p. 77) and drew "a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record" (Saldana, 2009, p. 105). In Vivo Coding utilized the original words that the participants used to capture the essence of the data.

Emotion Coding was employed after the first round of In Vivo Coding. Saldana (2009) highlights the implication of Emotion Coding to "explore intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions, especially in matters of social relationship, reasoning,

decision-making, judgment, and risk-taking" (p. 125). Emotion stands for the participant's attitudes towards students' engagement implementation and relationship building with students. The summarized coding was documented and categorized into different files in NVivo. The next step was analyzing the field notes and reflective journals. Data were chunked into pieces to add into the categories saved in NVivo under each participant's file.

In the second round of data analysis, files were analyzed thoroughly with updated thoughts documented. An updated log kept track of the ongoing work. Meanwhile, original data and data analysis were retrieved in NVivo.

Even though all the data were stored in NVivo, hard copies of the raw data were saved as well. It was easier to document spontaneous thoughts on hard copies. Reading a physical copy of the interview transcript allowed me to concentrate and capture subtle points that I may have missed when reading an electronic version.

The third round of data analysis was thematic analysis. Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) define thematic analysis as a form of pattern recognition within the data embedded under themes. The commonalities among the created categories were evaluated to uncover the themes pertinent to participants' teaching experiences.

## Data Representation

Case study description was the form of data representation in this study. Bhattacharya (2007) explains that case study description presents each case with rich contextual analysis first, and then conducts cross-case analysis. For each case, data were represented in thematic description. Boyatzis (1998) elicits that "thematic analysis enables scholars, observers, or practitioners to use a variety of types of information in a systematic manner that increases their accuracy or sensitivity in understanding and interpreting observations about people, events,

situations, and organizations" (p. 5). Thematic analysis guided through the process to identify the themes by searching through the data for identical meanings. Similarities and differences among the cases were elaborated after the discovery of themes in each case.

## Trustworthiness and Rigor

Being educated and having worked in higher education in China for many years, I am privileged to be able to resonate with the participants on the basis of shared Chinese culture and language. The commonalities that I embraced with the participants brought emotional closeness among us and then helped me to understand them easier than people from another cultural background.

Trustworthiness and rigor in qualitative research are the means to establish trust and confidence in the findings and results of a study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Reliability was achieved when participants checked their interview transcripts, as well as through the multiple sources of data of diverse types collected within two months. Trustworthiness of this study's findings was achieved by triangulation, participants' member check, and peer debriefing.

The primary strategy to achieve trustworthiness and rigor is triangulation, which requires the observer to "seek convergence and corroboration through the use of different data sources and methods" (Bowen, 2009, p. 28). In this study, several data collection methods were used, including student survey, informal conversation, semi-structured interview, class observation, and reflective journal. These data resources expanded the latitude of research data. The other form of triangulation that implied was the range of participants. The subjects varied in teaching experiences and teaching environments, which constructed a rich picture of attitudes and pedagogical practices by checking information across the participants.

All interviews and informal conversations were tape-recorded, and then transcripts were typed verbatim. Field notes were expanded at the end of each site work. Participants were asked to read straight through the transcripts, field notes, together with reflective journals periodically to check whether the interpretation and understandings were plausible. The whole process of member check enhanced the credibility of this study. Further lending credibility to this study, peer examination/peer debriefing was employed to verify the research process and findings with the major professor. The peer examination facilitated deeper reflective analysis.

## Reciprocity and Ethics

This case study method provided an in-depth knowledge regarding how these four Chinese instructors of English comprehended the student-instructor relationship and student engagement in their classes. Their detailed narration and class observation vividly demonstrated their thoughts, behaviors, and reflections in teaching. The compelling and powerful data gathered from this study answered how, what, and why participants built a certain relationship with students and engaged them in English classes.

Through the insider status, trusting relationships with the participants were cultivated. Each participant was given a pseudonym, and all the data were stored in password-protected files to protect participants' privacy. Appreciating participants' contribution to this study and based on Chinese culture, I invited participants to dinner to demonstrate my gratitude.

The risk of participating in this study was minimal because no sensitive topics were involved. Potential risks for participating for the teachers in this study might have been some feeling of discomfort when answering questions and concern about their teaching performance during class observation. However, all those risks were no more dangerous than what

participants might experience in their daily lives. None of the four participants experienced any discomfort or inconvenience during interviews and class observations. Thus, none of them wanted to withdraw from this study. The participants benefited from taking part in this study by reflecting on their own teaching experiences. The findings of this study were given to the participants to help them reflect and improve their teaching. Participants in this study are popular instructors, so other Chinese instructors of English will benefit from the findings of this study with respect to participants' teaching experiences.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the rationale for adopting a case study approach. The study design was explicitly described through aspects of participant selection, research sites, various types of data collection procedures, data management, data analysis and representation. Issues of rigor, trustworthiness, reciprocity, and ethics were stated to demonstrate the reliability and contribution of this study.

# Chapter 4 - RESEARCH FINDINGS

Four English instructors—Laura, Mary, Lily, and Jack—were selected to participate in this study based upon a combination of their notable student evaluations of teaching over the course of the past three years from 2015 to 2017 and their high mean scores in a student survey (See Appendix D) on evaluating student-instructor relationship and student engagement.

Participants taught English to non-English majors at two universities in China. Both Laura and Mary taught at Zhengzhou University, a public institution. The other two instructors, Lily and Jack, worked at Sias International University, a private institution. Mary was an associate professor, while the other three participants were instructors.

Student surveys were conducted with participants' students to assess the student-instructor relationship and student engagement. The questionnaire consists of thirty 5-point Likert-type scale questions, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) with a maximum of 150 points. Participants' mean scores in the survey are listed in Table 7.

**Table 7***: Student Survey Scores*

| | **Zhengzhou University** | | **Sias International University** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Name** | Laura | Mary | Lily | Jack |
| **Survey Scores** | 129 | 117 | 123 | 116 |

For each participant, two themes were discovered through a thematic analysis of data from informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, class observations, and reflective journals. Furthermore, the results of a cross-case analysis demonstrate the similarities and differences in findings among the four participants. Findings of this study addressed research questions on pedagogical practices and instructor-student relationship building.

# Within-Case Analysis

**Laura's Story**

Laura, an English instructor, had taught at Zhengzhou University for ten years. She was a high achiever, holding a master's degree and a bachelor's degree from two of the most elite universities in China, where she majored in British and American Literature. She taught both undergraduate and graduate English courses to non-English majors, including Comprehensive English, English Listening, Oral English, English Writing, Translation, and English Speaking and Listening.

Laura defined the teaching process as "bittersweet." The bitterness came from her frustration when students failed to meet her expectations; whereas, the sweetness burst out like a sparkling flame when she experienced complex interactions with students. Teaching had become a self-improving process to her as well, due to the fact that she continually improved her English proficiency and professional skills in teaching.

Laura was a typical case of cold hands, warm heart. The first impression she made on me was stern, distant, and meticulous, not a typical amiable teacher that most students adore. Strictness was her label, and Laura pushed her students to higher achievement. The truth was that she cared about her students on a deep level, above and beyond course grades on paper and pen examinations. She emphasized the role that English plays in real life by engaging them in dynamic class activities.

An interactive learning environment was the atmosphere in Laura's classes. Laura started her teaching journey in an Oral English course. She knew that the course would be a failure if there was no interaction with students. Therefore, she put great effort to actively engage students.

The more engaging students became, the more active they were. Thus, the interactive teaching style has become Laura's teaching feature.

Laura met her students twice a week for forty-five minutes each time in her English Listening classes in the semester of Spring 2018. She finished one unit each week with a specific teaching objective. In general, she conveyed course expectations and delivered course content during the first-class period through an interactive approach. In the second forty-five-minute session, students took charge of the class by performing their assignments, such as dubbing English movie clips, group presentations, story making, role-playing, and so on.

Laura portrayed herself as a "pushy and impatient" teacher who needed a "quick response" from students; otherwise, she became agitated. Therefore, she put great efforts in designing questions prior to classtime. Laura clarified:

> Effective questioning actually requires advanced preparation. After deciding my intentions in questioning, I evaluate the complexity of questions to make sure they are not too hard to answer. I also consider students' interests in answering these questions. Frankly speaking, this part is the hardest one. The questions should not be fluffy questions; instead, they should encourage deep and critical thought. Last but not least, it is critical to think about how to phrase questions to sound welcoming, interesting, and probing.

Laura was a designer who created class activities, and an organizer who helped students implement class activities effectively and efficiently. She was dedicated to creating a welcoming but challenging learning environment because she believed that the more engaged students are inside the classroom, the more active they become in learning English. What is more, students would never know what they can achieve unless they actually try it.

Laura engaged students through various class activities because she valued her students' contributions. She stated that it is difficult to define who is the teacher and who are the students because she constantly learns from her students. She remarked:

Current college students embrace numerous available channels through electronic devices to get the latest information. Through digital learning tools and resources, students learn English daily by themselves. The digital landscape has already changed college students' learning experiences. They get exposure to new technology and ideas much faster than I do. Thus, they always finish the assignments far beyond my expectations. I appreciate their creativity, braveness, and determination.

During her ten years of English teaching, Laura has strengthened her expectations on students' potentiality and motivation. She did not believe in individualized education when teaching large classes, so she set up the tone at the first day of school to challenge every student to engage in all assignments and activities applying the same standard. Laura concluded that her students had met and even exceeded her expectations oftentimes.

**Empowering and Challenging Students.**

*A teacher will definitely be amazed at students' performance and improvement when offering them an extra push and shove.* Laura pushed her students beyond their comfort zones by providing them many opportunities to perform inside the classroom. All the class activities were designed to fulfill certain teaching goals. Normally, Laura established a general teaching goal for each semester, which was designed to be fulfilled and demonstrated by the end of this semester. Over the course of each semester, she prepared students to achieve the final target step-by-step. Therefore, the specific teaching objectives in each week were different. After finishing all the assignments within each week, students should be well prepared for the final project. She offered an example:

> Take freshmen as an example, the final goal in my oral English class for the first semester is to let students make a presentation. Thus, I prepare them weekly by finishing various practices including dialogue practices, role-playing, etc. Making up dialogue cultivates students' sense of active communication. When students do the role-playing, they practice specific communication skills that they learned during the week.

Laura would not lower her expectations for any student, but she provided explicit feedback to each student. The undeniable reality was that students' performance varied in class

activities and assignments. Laura admitted that she often felt cruel and harsh when identifying

students' weakness, but she was obligated to let students know their weaknesses so they could

improve. Laura emphasized that she loves every one of her students and does not want to hurt

anybody, so she has kept one rule — delivering positive and critical feedback simultaneously.

She explained that she must identify students' strengths along with their weaknesses to make

students feel more comfortable when receiving her feedback.

Laura wanted to provide opportunities to keep every student engaged. However, there

were always some hesitant students who were either overly reticent or weak in English. Laura

utilized strategies to get them involved with the same expectations as other students. She

revealed:

> To those students who are normally quiet in my classes, I constantly ask them to answer
> questions to make sure that they are noticed and welcome to participate. To those
> students who are weak in English, I go and talk to them privately. I tell them frankly
> about their weakness and how to solve their problems. I think the sense of trust and
> sincerity is important to the students. My job is to be critical to help students to become
> better, not simply sugarcoat them.

Laura confirmed that high grades are important to most Chinese students; thus she

motivated students to engage in classes by connecting all their performances to their final grades.

She graded students' assignments and their classroom performances, which would be the final

score by adding them together. Laura explained:

> I value interactive classes, so I need students to express their ideas and answer questions
> to initiate and stimulate their participation to foster interactions among us. To encourage
> students to speak their minds in classes, especially when they are freshmen, I reward
> them with "coupons" every time they answer designated questions. Those coupons are
> scores that will be added to their final grades. The truth is that many students scramble
> for "coupons." Students are different each year. I came to the realization that students in
> the class of 2016 and 2017 are not reticent anymore, instead they are forthright,
> confident, and sociable. They are more willing to express themselves and they like to be
> challenged.

Laura asserted that the more power students embrace in class assignments, the better they perform. Empowering activities were their favorite ones. When students embraced the decision-making power, they became more creative and engaged. Laura exemplified:

> I asked my students to imitate the High Table, which is a tradition at Cambridge University. We learned the themes of food ordering and fashion. I combined them to design this class activity and let students imitate the scene in the High Table dinner. I just provided them the idea, the high table; then it was their responsibility to design everything — scenery, clothes, menu, dialogue, etc. To my surprise, they did fantastic jobs. To my understanding, most of them believed it was a chance for them to show their talents, especially those students who are not so good at English. They finally got a chance to demonstrate their talents rather than just rely on English.

In contrast, students did not like restricted activities, such as dialogue making. They did not like having to repeat the same dialogue and practice the same skills. They got bored with this kind of repetition.

**Student Motivation.**

***Motivation and competition foster an engaging learning environment.*** Students' motivation in learning English determines their performance. Laura taught the course English Listening to four classes; two classes were comprised of medical students and the other two were chemistry students. Students from these two majors were the ones who achieved relatively high scores in National College Examinations when admitted to Zhengzhou University. However, the learning environment among the two majors was very different. Laura enjoyed the active and collaborative learning environment in the classes of medical students. Laura analyzed:

> Generally speaking, medical students are much more motivated and determined in learning English because they know that English is vital to their personal development. For example, most of their professors are either PhDs or visiting scholars from overseas; thus their major courses are delivered bilingually. Meanwhile, they need to read English literatures in the medical arena. In contrast, chemistry students seem to let nature take its course and are not very serious about their English learning because they do not treat English as a decisive skill. Taking English courses is simply to fulfill degree requirements.

Student participation varied because of their perceptions about the importance of English to their discipline. Laura stated:

> The medical students have been doing great in my classes. The competitive classroom environment stimulates students to do their best in English learning. Most students make great effort to learn English, so they perform fantastically in class activities. The terrific performance that advanced students demonstrate cultivates a ripple effect on the other students to motivate them to perform better because nobody wants to lag behind the others. In contrary, chemistry students think that their performance is acceptable because there is always some performance worse. This is an affirmation that the competitive learning environment boosts student engagement.

Laura articulated that dubbing English movie clips was the only class activity students needed to complete monthly, which was also the students' favorite class activity. Laura analyzed that it was the students' competitive mentality that made this activity attractive. Students appreciated their classmates' excellent dubbing, which motivated their ambition to be as good as their peers. Furthermore, students realized their potentiality after witnessing their improvement in the same assignment.

The competitive learning atmosphere fostered among the medical students stimulated them to become more engaged and motivated in learning. Correspondingly, the medical students improved their English proficiency faster. On the contrary, the chemistry students did not improve significantly because of their lack of motivation in English learning. Therefore, Laura kept appraising chemistry students' achievements and identifying their weaknesses to motivate them to study harder.

Laura further conveyed that she implemented the same teaching plans for both medical students and chemistry students, and never lowered her expectations of any student. The differences lay in how she provided feedback to students. To medical students, her feedback emphasized students' deficiencies with additional compliments. To chemistry students, her feedback highlighted what students achieved with some advice. Laura explained:

I provide students positive reinforcement on their accomplishments, but I also need to explicitly express their shortages. Teaching and learning should be targeted. Medical students are highly motivated, so I let them know what they need to improve once I found it, because that is essential. Chemistry students are weak in their motivation, so encouragement and compliments are catalyst to increase their willingness to participate in my classes.

Laura also provided each student with individualized feedback, which affirmed that she cares and knows every one of them. Laura regretted the lack of personal communication with her students as a result of the limited class period. In order to demonstrate her caring to each student, she provided students with feedback in writing. She described:

It is required by the school to grade students' homework at least once a semester. I not only grade their homework, but also write comments on their performances in my classes. The comments are individualized and handwritten. I provide one-on-one positive reinforcement to students' achievement, as well as critical remarks on their inappropriate behaviors in learning. Students are smart and sensitive once they realize that they are recognized and cared, they will immediately be motivated to behave themselves in learning. For example, there was a boy who always slept in my classes due to his addiction in computer games. I wrote down my concern and dissatisfaction on his performance in the comments. After realizing that he had been recognized, he has been well engaged in my classes.

Laura's emotional bond with her students has laid a solid foundation to reach high levels of effectiveness through remarkable results. Laura clarified that even though she was strict with her students, students knew that they've made improvement from Laura's "tough love."

Laura worried about a plethora of challenges in which she has been confronted. The traditional constraints came from short class periods, the large class size, unmovable tables and chairs, and the lack of technical support. However, her biggest concern was for her students. She has been struggling with how to convince students on the importance of English fluency. She believed that self-motivation and self-discipline are crucial to students' success in English learning. Therefore, a conclusive reason was needed to be discovered to invoke students' self-conscious volition in learning. She revealed her concern:

I do not know how to effectively motivate students like those chemistry students, whose willingness in learning English is not strong. Self-motivation and self-discipline play a vital role in their learning. They are not willing to make a great effort in my classes, which normally lowers their personal expectations. They cannot see their potential without effort, and the truth is they can do much better. I also cannot provide them with a persuasive reason to tell them that they must study hard in my classes. This really bothers me.

Laura expressed concerns about the future of her "good students" as well. She mentioned that she likes her medical students very much. They were so motivated, diligent, and perseverant in learning English. Laura was confident in their promising future, but she remained concerned that current curriculum design cannot prepare them in the long run. Laura exemplified:

To be honest, I personally do not appreciate the current curriculum design. For example, it is required in the course Comprehensive English to teach eight articles in the required textbook each semester to enhance students' ability to comprehend in English. I do not think that eight articles have a profound effect on developing students' reading skills and forming their English reading habits. What is more, the content of these articles is neither interesting nor up-to-date. I cannot convince my students or even myself on the practical benefits of this course.

Laura confirmed her perspective that the current English curriculum should be revised, focusing on current students' characteristics and their needs in English. A massive investigation should be launched to hear the voices from students and teachers to design an effective curriculum to make it in high demand and yet attractive. She explained that students who were born in the 2000s are so different from those in the 1990s, and most of them are highly advanced in English proficiency by the utilization of dynamic educational resources. Correspondingly, the curriculum design should be based on most students' English proficiency and the practical use of English in real lives.

**Mary's Story**

Mary was an associate professor at Zhengzhou University with more than twenty years' teaching experience in higher educational institutions in China. Being raised in a teacher's

family, Mary was given a behind-the-scenes look at education at an early age. She said she loves teaching, enjoys working with her students, and believes that teaching is the most noble profession.

Mary affirmed that a fundamental requirement in English education is linguistic knowledge. The high-level achievement in English learning is to develop students' cultural awareness in cross-cultural communication by acknowledging the cultural differences and fostering various modes of thinking. Mary seemed most dedicated to facilitating students in promoting independent thinking and achieving deep understanding of the themes in readings.

Recalling her over twenty years' experiences in teaching English to non-English major students, Mary attributed her achievement to her affective bond with students. Mary emphasized that the affective bond with her students fosters their sense of belonging and increases their volition to engage in learning. Mary displayed genuinely happy smiles in classes, conveying love, encouragement, and consolation to her students. Mary's smile also demonstrated her energy and enthusiasm while teaching. Mary elaborated:

> A student cannot achieve true learning under fear, especially when learning a language. If a student is timid in classes, how can s/he speak up? My magic secret is "smile," which proves to be effective in dissipating fear. I smile to my students all the time, even after s/he provides me a wrong answer. I endeavor to eliminate students' fear and worry in my classes.

Mary claimed that an interactive climate of learning is demanded to provide students opportunities to express personal understandings on learning materials. The foundation in achieving an interactive class is to create a safe and welcoming learning environment. Mary affirmed that her smile and encouragement provided a solid foundation to foster a safe climate of learning. Students performed better without the influence of psychological fear and resistance.

**Caring for Students.**

***Both students and teachers benefit from the affective bond they establish.*** In spite of the existence of various technical devices facilitating English learning in virtual space, Mary emphasized that classroom-based teaching holds a unique advantage – the affective connection among people. Language needs to be expressed verbally with personal affection included. Increasing a strong bond between students and teachers lowers students' affective filters in speaking English. Mary described a phenomenon:

> Some of my students are diligent and well-behaved, but they are reticent to speak in public. They are timid and afraid. I think probably this comes from their former learning experiences. I would like to make a change. I let them know that it is safe to make mistakes in my classes. They will not get criticized and punished in my classes.

Being inspired by her mother, Mary was an empathetic professor. She did not believe in an authoritarian approach to education; instead, she treated her students as equals to increase their self-esteem. Thus far, Mary has not yelled at nor picked on any student. Mary confirmed that students are to be educated at school and should be well-treated. Mary elaborated:

> I was a college student during the 1980s and most of my teachers were super strict, impatient, dictatorial, and tough. They barely smiled in classes, and I was so afraid of them. I did not want to answer any question because it would be such a humiliation if a teacher criticized me in public. Therefore, I was always quiet. At that time, I made up my mind that I wanted to become a cheerful and caring teacher.

Personal communication is the premise to build rapport with students. Mary regretted that she did not have enough time to communicate with students individually during class periods. She met her students only once a week, two hours each time. To solve this problem, she provided students with her personal contact information to encourage them to talk to her if needed. Meanwhile, she tried to remember every student's name to make them feel important. Mary explained:

I encourage my students to talk to me about anything. I know for sure that they become active in my classes only when they trust me. It is true that I am an English teacher, but I am also the one whom they can turn to since I am probably the age of their parents. I treat all my students as my children and I want them to be successful.

Once stepping inside Mary's classroom, students were immersed in a relaxing learning environment. Mary broke her classes down into chunks and cheered her students by telling funny stories relating to subject content during intervals. Students laughed frequently. Mary knew that real learning happens when students are relaxed and self-motivated. Mary added:

> The longer I teach my students, the more engaged they become. Of course, they achieved better grades and improved English faster. My former students, whom I started to teach when they were freshmen students, the climate of learning in their classes was more relaxing and comfortable. Every student actively engaged and the whole class was energetic and active.

Mary provided students positive feedback to improve their performance. However, she had to employ some strategies to encourage certain students who had failed to meet her expectations. Normally, she confirmed her beliefs in students' ability to perform better as the first step. Meanwhile, she empowered students to evaluate their personal performances. The final step was to talk directly to students to explain why they deserved a bad grade. Mary was not a believer in the effects of criticism; instead, she had faith in the importance of innate motivation. Mary explained:

> Normally, I talk mildly to students to encourage them to perform better next time. I let them know that I trust them and believe that they are capable of doing better. Meanwhile, I empower students to make judgements in group activities. After comparing themselves to their classmates, students know if they need to make greater effort next time. If the two strategies fail to encourage students, I will talk to students individually and let them know they have to take the consequences by penalizing on final scores if they keep failing to meet the requirements.

Mary was thankful that she had reaped the benefits of the affective bond with her students by treating them fairly and sincerely. Students trusted Mary and treated her not only as a professor, but also as a life mentor. Students turned to her for advice in English learning along

with personal issues. Her former students kept in touch with her, and they either shared with her their achievement in professional careers or asked Mary for advice. Mary said:

> Every time when students see me either on campus or off campus, they come over and talk with me happily. My former students called me when they got a promotion or something good happened. Some students told me that they can be relied on if there is anything they can do for me. I deeply appreciate their trust and concern. That is the biggest fulfillment in my professional career.

Mary affirmed that being a professor is more than teaching content materials, whereas the highest contribution is to make a positive impact on students. She loved her students and felt very proud that her students respected and loved her as well. Mary enjoyed this sense of fulfillment by making an impact on her students' lives to support them for a bright future.

**Pedagogical Challenges.**

***Students' English linguistic abilities and educational background constrain the implementation of certain pedagogical practices.*** Mary discovered that students demonstrate various regional characteristics. She summarized that students from Henan province are passive learners, not active learners like students from the southern provinces. Generally speaking, Henan students are diligent, introverted, and high in self-consciousness. She expressed her understanding:

> Most students who come from Henan province have been under the pressure of an examination-oriented education for a long time. Henan is the largest populated province but has an extreme lack of good educational resources. Therefore, the competition among Henan students is severe. To be admitted to a local university, Henan students need much higher grades compared with students from other provinces. Accordingly, students were well trained in completing pencil and paper high stake examinations silently. They are not well-trained in speaking publicly to join class activities. Meanwhile, most Henan students from rural area have problems in English pronunciation. Probably because their English teachers in primary and secondary education are not good at English pronunciation. In general, they are quieter and behave self-consciously in class activities.

To help students become more confident in class activities, Mary arranged small group activities as a first step. During this process, she constantly praised students' achievement and

improvement. Meanwhile, Mary required each group to elect a student as a delegate to demonstrate in public. As time passed by, students eventually became more confident and comfortable with talking in public.

At Zhengzhou University, freshmen were arranged into different classes based on their English grades on the National College Examination. Students with higher scores were gathered into advanced English classes, and the rest would be arranged into regular English classes with a majority of students from Henan province. Mary taught both advanced English classes and regular classes, and she found it is critical to employ different teaching methods, based on her students' command of English.

Mary explained that the major problems in regular classes were the big class size and constraints from students' English proficiency. During each semester, lecturing took a large portion during the first half of semester because Mary needed to cover all the content material. In the second half of each semester, she let students do peer instruction on certain reading materials. Mary said that a large amount of time was needed to finish class activities in big classes, so she needed to finish her teaching first and then let students lead classes.

The most frequently utilized class activity in regular classes was a spelling test, which became a regular feature of her teaching. Memorizing vocabulary is the basic foundation to English language learning. Unfortunately, Mary realized that her students in regular classes believed that memorizing vocabulary was tedious. To help students remember vocabulary, she constantly gave students spelling tests. She normally gave several rounds of dictation. During the first round, she invited four students to go to the front to write six words in the chalkboard, and the rest wrote in their seats. After that, another four students were invited to the front to check and revise the misspelled words while the rest of the students checked their own spellings

personally. In this case, students needed to prepare for the spelling test ahead of time, yet they were not very pressured when writing in front since it was their peers who corrected their spellings. Completing these steps, Mary began another round of spelling tests with different students writing on the chalkboard. Mary confirmed that spelling tests were widely used in regular classes to compel them to remember vocabulary. Mary elaborated:

> My students like this class activity. They even feel honored to be able to write in front of their peers. You know that students cannot concentrate all the time. Once I discover that most of them need a break, I let them do the spelling test. I will tell them ahead of time which day I am going to have the spelling test, but they are not sure who will be asked to write in front, so they need to be well prepared.

Although spelling tests were effective in regular classes, they were unnecessary in advanced classes. Students in advanced classes were responsible for vocabulary memorization, which was also regarded as the fundamental requirement to them. Mary designed class activities that required a high level of intellectual development such as small group writing, debate, drama, and role playing for students in advanced classes. Mary was pleased that the class size in advanced classes was relatively small, normally around twenty students. Thus, she guaranteed that every student was well involved in class activities.

Mary was satisfied with students' performances in her advanced classes. Mary attributed the success to students' self-discipline and their good command of English. She illustrated a popular class activity:

> I divided students into several groups with three to four students in each group and assigned a writing task to them. After discussing for a while, they wrote a draft. Fifteen minutes later, they read their writing in front of all the students. Other groups made comments on their writing regarding the aspects of structure, fluency, word choices, etc. They benefited from this process because students provided helpful feedback.

Mary admitted that the group writing activity seemed not very effective in regular classes, based on her experience. On one hand, some students were not capable of finishing the

writing within fifteen minutes; on the other hand, it took up a huge amount of class time due to the large class size. Therefore, she decided to discard this group activity in regular classes.

The most popular class activity among all the students was a class play. Students formed groups voluntarily, and each group was responsible for scripts, clothes, and scenery design. The play was limited to no more than eight minutes for each group. This class activity integrated students' imagination, language abilities, communication skills, as well as teamwork. Mary explained her personal understanding of its popularity:

> A class play makes it is possible to let everyone become the center of attention. Generally speaking, students who have a flair for English have always received the attention among their peers. But in class play, students can show themselves not simply from English but also from their talents in performance and imagination. This activity offers a platform to make every student shine. It also fosters communication among students and makes the class fun.

Mary concluded that her primary goal in teaching was to invoke students' willingness in English learning by transferring them from being passive and disinterested into active and engaged English speakers. However, the ultimate goal in her classes was to cultivate students' independent thinking skills and English skills to prepare them for their future careers. Over the course to achieve these goals, she set up her expectations and designed teaching plans based on students' characteristics.

**Lily's Story**

Lily was in her early thirties and has been working at Sias International University for eight years as an English instructor. In 2010, she was selected from among excellent English major graduates, based on her prominent academic performance over the course of four years' undergraduate studies at Sias International University, to work in the College of Foreign Languages. She has taught three English courses: Oral English, Comprehensive English, and English Listening. I saw her as a humble, studious, mild, and easy-going teacher.

Lily aimed to become a professor, and she attributed her career success to the enthusiasm she embraced in English teaching. She treated herself as a bridge over which she invites her students to cross to enter the English world. She devoted herself to help students in two aspects. One of her duties was to facilitate students to succeed in English tests by mastering various kinds of learning methods and capturing techniques and skills in English examinations. The other goal was to enable students to get exposure to western culture and English literature. Lily hoped that her students would eventually enjoy English learning on their volition.

Lily divided engagement into two parts: student engagement and teacher engagement. Lily was satisfied and confident with her engagement in teaching, including class preparation, class demonstration, and follow-ups after class. In reference to student engagement, Lily was struggling to balance the need of engaging students with instilling content knowledge to them during limited class time.

Lily deeply appreciated the importance of student engagement in her classes, believing it is reciprocal to both teachers and students – students improve their English communication skills and enrich the teaching content, whereas teachers have a chance to know students better and discover their potential. Students' engagement inside the classroom demonstrates their output in English, which helps students to better understand the linguistic knowledge. In contrast, a teacher-oriented English class only meets the requirement of English input rather than output.

Even though realizing the importance of student engagement in English learning, Lily acknowledged that there is a huge gap between ideality and reality. Some intrinsic limitations prevented her from implementing various class activities, such as her personal educational background plus her lack of professional pedagogical training, and extrinsic elements such as large class size, classroom resources, and composition of students. Confidence and educational

goals are the two most appropriate words to describe her years of teaching, which also direct the way she interacts with her students.

**Professional Knowledge.**

***A teacher's confidence in professional knowledge including pedagogic knowledge, subject knowledge, and knowledge of students and their characteristics dominate his/her effort in building relationships with students and engaging them in the classroom.*** Lily said that she realized the moment she became an English instructor of the necessity to engage students in the classroom and to build rapport with them, but the effort that she has made has differed over the years based on the self-evaluation of her professional knowledge. As she increased her confidence in professional knowledge, she has become less willing to build close relationships with students and make adjustments in her teaching simply because of students' feedback.

Lily divided her teaching experiences into three phases and explained that being friends with and pleasing her students were the main themes in the phase when she first stood in front of students. Lily recalled that she had close relationships with her students over the first three years when she was a novice teacher. Because she was single, young, energetic, and passionate about her new job, she spent plenty of time hanging out with her students in her spare time. As a result, students actively engaged in classes. Meanwhile, Lily tried all means to design a wide range of class activities to draw students' attention. Lily described:

> As a novice teacher, I was not confident in my teaching, so I made it up by being close with my students to make them trust and like me to ignore my weakness in teaching. I have to admit that I had a wonderful time those years by being close with my students and they engaged very well in my classes.

Years went by, Lily shifted gradually from a student-centered to a teacher-centered classroom into her second phase of teaching. As her professional knowledge broadened, she realized that increasing students' grades in national English examinations should be her teaching

goal rather than pleasing students inside the classroom. Achieving better scores in high stake

examinations are commended from the higher-level administration. What is more, Lily strongly

believed that a distinguished professor should be students' idol, whom students want to become

– one who was knowledgeable, humble, and charismatic. To make students understand that she

was a knowledgeable teacher, Lily needed to demonstrate subject knowledge to students. Lily

wanted her students to feel that they deserved to have her as their English instructor. Thus, Lily

focused her expertise on English examinations preparation. Lily revealed the deep reason:

> Even though I had several years of teaching experience, I know myself well that I am far away from knowledgeable in English linguistic knowledge and English culture. I have neither studied abroad nor read enough books. I am not able to offer them much in teaching content nor in their extra English reading assignments. Therefore, I concentrated on what I am good at.

However, new problems emerged after focusing on preparing students for English

examinations. Students got bored and quiet in Lily's classes, which made her a solo on the stage.

Shortly afterward, Lily entered the third phase of teaching – balancing lecture and students'

engagement. Lily summarized her current teaching as:

> I am still exploring the balance to satisfy students' interests in English learning to engage them as well as meet the requirements in high stake tests. I have to say that it is not easy to find this perfect joint point.

Lily acknowledged that emotional closeness with students is crucial to engage students in

the classroom. Students perform better in classes once they feel welcomed and respected. To

make students feel known, Lily memorized all her students' names. However, relationship

building with students was not her emphasis anymore. Lily illustrated:

> Partially due to my status as a middle-aged mother, I am not willing to be too close to my students. There is so much going on in my life, and I do not have enough time in my spare time to communicate with my students. Also, I am confident in my job without being close with my students. Even though I still love my students, I will not spend as much time as what I did with my students.

Group work was the most popular class activity Lily used to engage students, which involves students working collaboratively. Lily assigned students into groups with a leader, and students either prepared peer teaching on learning materials or finished a presentation. But most of the time, Lily had to ask students to stand up to answer questions, which is a passive yet an effective way to engage her students. Lily illustrated:

> Generally speaking, freshmen study much harder than sophomore students. I am teaching sophomore students, and most of my students do not like to engage inside the classroom voluntarily. Thus, I have to force them to engage. For example, I ask students to prepare for all the vocabularies, and they will be asked to give us explanation of these words and make up example sentences by using these new words. Students are afraid to lose face in front of their classmates, so they become more concentrated and prepared whenever they notice that they are going to be asked to answer questions.

Lily confirmed that students' English proficiency constrains the implementation of teaching methods. She explained her selections in teaching strategies:

> I know there are many other ways to engage students, but to be honest, I do not trust that my students are capable in those activities. For example, I think a form of debate is a good way to demonstrate their skills in English. Yet, do they have the ability to express themselves good enough to make the debate flow? Or I believe that English writing demonstrates students' English level. Thus, I do want to give them a project to write a paper on anything they like, and it also will be great to let them make a presentation at the end of each semester. The reality is that most of my students seem to be indifferent about their studies, which, of course, they cannot fulfill my expectations in these activities.

When being asked to explore why students do not care about their studies, Lily sighed, helpless to the fact that students were not afraid of flunking any courses because they knew they would graduate anyway. Without any pressure of graduation, students became less motivated and disciplined. Lily understood that her students had been pushed so hard in preparing for the National College Examinations in senior high schools, so they were very relieved once they began their college lives without any pressure.

Students' motivation in learning English also explains their behaviors at school. Lily's students were non-English majors. Some students realized the importance of English; whereas other students believed it was unnecessary or they were not interested in English. Lack of motivation in English learning decreased their engagement inside the classroom.

Lily admitted that the culture of Sias International University also influenced students' attitudes in learning. Being well-known for its beautiful campus, plenty of extracurricular activities, and its philosophy that students' needs are vital, Sias offered students all kinds of after-school activities which distracted them from studying. What is more, students' voices were the most important at Sias International University, so teachers did not want to push students too hard to make them angry; doing so could deteriorate teacher evaluation results ironically.

Lily led into another topic to demonstrate her eagerness in improving her teaching skills. Lily said:

> I should not place blame because I am powerless in handling all these problems. What I can do is to improve my teaching skills and become capable of teaching all kinds of students. Ultimately, I need to learn more in pedagogical practices. All the teaching methods I am using are mainly the ones my former foreign teachers used to teach me while I was a student. Sias does not provide faculty members enough professional training opportunities, so I have to find resources online or attend seminars by myself during summer vacations.

Lily affirmed that abundant knowledge in pedagogical practices would enrich her classes to engage students as well as improve students' academic performances in English examinations. Students' rapport with Lily largely determined how they perform in her classes. Lily indicated that those students who she taught as a novice teacher were the best-engaged students without any doubt. Those students were comfortable with Lily, so they engaged very well in her classes. Accordingly, Lily put her greatest effort in teaching those students. Emotional factors played a vital role for Lily and her students as well.

**Educational Goals.**

***Educational goals and objectives to pursue high grades in examinations determine the effective use of teaching content and implementation of teaching methods.*** In China, most students value scores as their lifeline to be admitted to colleges and universities. Nevertheless, students' academic performance on tests is an indicator used to evaluate teaching all the way from primary education to post-secondary education. This has made it impossible to stop teachers from pursuing students' scores in high stake tests by pouring knowledge into students' brains.

Lily believed that in the Chinese examination-oriented educational system, scores are the fundamental criterion to measure the quality of education. For example, in primary and secondary educational institutions, statistical data are gathered each year to calculate students' enrollment rates to upper-level educational institutions. The enrollment rate is a critical standard to evaluate whether a school is good or not. Furthermore, student performance on examinations is an important indicator to distinguish good teachers from the average ones, based on traditional social norms.

Lily's undergraduate students needed to take the national English tests – College English Tests (CET) Band 4 and Band 6, which examine the English proficiency of undergraduate students to ensure they had reached the required English levels stated in the National College English Teaching Syllabuses (Zheng & Cheng, 2008). This highlights the importance of the CET tests through the enormously large number of test-takers, the selection purposes of the examination, and its massive impact on university/college English teaching and learning in China (Zheng & Cheng, 2008). To help students pass the CET Band 4 after their second-year studies at Sias International University, Lily described her role as:

One of my roles is to teach students examination skills to get higher scores on English examinations. I want them to know that there are specific reading techniques and methods to get higher scores. Nobody taught me tactics in English learning and English examination preparation when I was a student. By all means, I explored all the methods by my own over the course of years of learning and teaching. I realized that those methods are very useful, so I hope students can yield twice the result with half the effort by employing those test taking strategies.

In accordance with the goal to prepare students for national English examinations, Lily admitted that she needed to find a perfect balance between her lecturing and class activities. To describe the good class activities design, Lily shared her years of experience:

Students prefer unpredictable, creative, and interesting class activities, which appear fresh to stimulate students to actively engage. I discovered an interesting phenomenon is that the lower students' English proficiency is, the pickier they are in my teaching. I guess it is partially because that their interest in learning English is so weak or they cannot understand at all, so they need stronger stimulation to conquer their resistance in learning English.

Lily admitted that her teaching was designed to meet the requirements from the majority students' English proficiency, rather than satisfying every student's needs. However, Lily was willing to help any student with extra support after school. Lily believed that students' subjective willingness in learning primarily determined their success in her classes. Lily stated:

College life should be self-disciplined, filled with a tremendous amount of reading and self-study. Unfortunately, this rarely happens to my students. Thus, I value students' attitudes in learning. No matter what their grades are, as long as a student demonstrates his/her willingness and effort in learning, I would like to do anything to help. Of course, it means that I will be stricter to those students who want to learn. I believe that strict teachers produce outstanding students because pressure produces improvement.

Lily demonstrated that there were restraints that make it hard for her to engage students in her classes. The main constraint came from a large class size. Lily believed that thirty students would be the best for a class size since students could feel being noticed and cared about. One reason was that each student could have an opportunity to speak inside the classroom. The other reason was that it was much easier to arrange class activities and prepare extra reading materials.

The second constraint was the lack of professional training and resources. Lily keenly

hoped to implement vibrant and innovative instructional methods to invoke students' willingness

in learning English, but she lacked pedagogical knowledge resulting from insufficient training.

She defined it as a deficiency in working at Sias International University compared to working at

a public university:

> Sias does not provide faculty members enough professional training and teaching
> resources. Even though there are lectures periodically, most of them are theoretically,
> not helpful for practical use inside the classroom. I know two or three instructors from the
> College of International Education went to FHSU to get training on teaching methods last
> year, but few teachers have the chance to go. I am always the top on teacher evaluation
> each year, but I has not chosen once to attend a professional training paid by the school. I
> think this is the shortage of working at a private university in China. As far as I know,
> teachers in public schools have more chances to attend all kinds of seminars and meetings
> on pedagogy each year. I met a college teacher who works at a common public school
> in Wuhan, and she told me that she is paid to attend meetings and seminars five times on
> average each year.

Lily also stated her opinion that educational technology training is strongly demanded.

Since cell phones and tablets have become the necessities of Chinese students' daily lives,

educational technology should be spread and utilized to increase both teaching efficiency and

students' enjoyment of learning in the same way.

Lily commented that she was still partially sticking to Chinese traditional teaching

methods by which she was educated and raised for many years. Lacking knowledge of

pedagogical practices and being restricted by internal and external constraints have put Lily into

an awkward situation – her teaching skills fall short of her wishes to lead a student-centered

classroom as well as gain academic achievement in standardized examinations.

**Jack's Story**

Jack earned his master's degree majoring in American literature. He has been teaching

English to non-English majors at Sias International University for around eight years. He was

exposed to English teaching theories and pedagogical courses while he studied English education for his bachelor's degree. Mainly because he was raised in a teacher's family, he was convinced by his family to step into academia. Jack admitted that initially he was dubious about his decision to choose teaching as a professional career. However, he realized that he had made the right decision as the years passed by.

Teaching in China is not a lucrative profession, but Jack perceived it as a rewarding experience. Jack confirmed his idea that material wealth cannot compare with the sense of achievement and honor that he has gained by working with his students. He achieved a strong sense of fulfillment by realizing he's been a part in students' learning process. Jack illustrated:

> I have to admit that teaching is not a well-paid job comparing to be a doctor, an engineer, or a lawyer. As a husband and father, it is my responsibility to raise the whole family. I have to admit that every time I got together with my former classmates, I felt a little bit depressed after hearing their annual incomes. However, this kind of depression only lasted for a minute. I know for sure that my job is noble, and I am really excited to be able to make a positive impact on my students. I feel so honored and fulfilled hearing the appreciation from my students. This sense of feeling is what I cannot receive from other careers.

Reflecting on his teaching, Jack defined it as an exploratory journey. Jack had started teaching by implementing traditional methods, like the chalk-and-talk approach, until problems emerged. He got bored, as his students did, and then Jack was convinced that he needed to find ways to energize his class. Without explicit guidance and teaching modes to follow, he gradually adjusted his teaching to pursue efficiency, enjoyment, and engagement. Jack achieved effective results for the fact that there is no single student sleeping in his classes anymore. Students enjoy learning from him by being actively involved inside the classroom.

Due to constraints from students' English proficiency and a large class size, Jack acknowledged the impossibilities of a fully student-led classroom. He divided his classes into two segments: lecturing and student-led activities. Jack summarized that his lecturing takes up

50% to 60% while student-led activities take up approximately 40% of the class time. Students'

English proficiency is the foundation to understanding learning materials and engaging in class

activities. Therefore, Jack preferred to spend more time on English language learning to enhance

their English proficiency when teaching freshmen students. Jack concluded that the ratio

between lecturing and class activities varies, based on students' English level.

      To get students to experience enjoyment while listening to his lecture, Jack endeavored to

discover interesting learning materials and add humor into his delivery. Jack browsed the latest

English news and English learning websites every single day to collect appropriate materials to

enrich his class. Further, he utilized humor as a part of his pedagogy. He developed his sense of

humor and increased his language ability to create a relaxing and friendly learning environment.

Jack affirmed that humor alleviates boredom and stimulates students' interest in learning

English.

      Jack committed himself to helping students gain knowledge and foster new insights. He

believed that linguistic knowledge learning was the lowest and fundamental requirement in his

classes, and he determined to pursue a higher-level achievement which was to cultivate students'

independent critical thinking ability as well. Accordingly, he endeavored to remove traditional

English teaching from his classes. Instead of spending plenty of time on semantics and grammar,

Jack arranged discussion sessions to involve students in expressing their opinions on certain

topics. Jack summarized his educational philosophy:

> The substantial purpose of education is to prepare students for the real world, which
> requires them to be self-motivated, think independently and critically, and then solve
> problems by using all the resources around them. I am determined to help my students
> discover their potentiality in all aspects mentioned above. English is simply a tool to help
> them understand the world. By learning English, they also improve their learning
> abilities. Thus, my job is to help them to learn "how to learn" rather than merely
> "babysitting" them in learning.

At the core of Jack's teaching philosophy was treating students fairly and ethically. Jack explained that he may not have had enough time to satisfy every student's needs inside the classroom. However, he provided personal feedback and support outside the class whenever needed by students via online communication or in person. Jack asserted that communication outside the classroom is his primary approach to foster a positive relationship with his students. He was confident that he knows each one of his students by name, English proficiency level, and performance at school.

Two themes surfaced after the analysis of original data from Jack. One theme was that elicitation of students' ideas is the key to education because of the benefits to both teachers and students. The second theme was that being respectful and sincere to students requires humility, patience, and love.

**Student Involvement.**

***Elicitation of students' ideas is the key to education because of the benefits to both teachers and students.*** Highly influenced by the educational philosophy of Confucius, Jack believed that teachers and students are supposed to grow together, and the learning process is supposed to be mutually beneficial. Jack said that the story regarding Confucius and his favorite disciple Yan Hui enlightened him profoundly. Confucius regarded teaching and learning as a reciprocal process. A teacher's responsibility is to foster students' abilities in thinking and learning. However, a teacher should not simulate dictatorship in teaching. In reverse, students are responsible to question what is taught to help teachers to make an improvement. For this reason, Confucius criticized Yan Hui because he appreciated everything Confucius had taught him. Yan Hui was supposed to be critical rather than believe what Confucius conveyed blindly.

Therefore, Jack set his primary goal in teaching as cultivating students' thinking ability. Accordingly, Jack arranged group discussions or debates or asked open-ended questions to encourage students to express their perspectives. Students preferred discussion topics closely relevant to their lives, such as cultural differences between East and West, educational differences, air pollution, and movies. Jack described that it is beneficial to spend the time to engage students in these activities. In order to save time for class activities, Jack reformed his teaching methods. Jack illustrated:

> I ask students to preview learning materials individually before classes. I only highlight the key points they need to capture and answer their questions in classes. Students have reference books that can help them while they are learning by themselves. My job is to emphasize what they must capture, answer their questions, as well as design and arrange a discussion to go smoothly.

Jack acknowledged another feature of Chinese students is that often they prefer to ask questions or communicate privately rather than in front of classmates. He came up with an idea to ask students to write down their questions and give them to him; then the whole class could discuss these questions in class.

Jack stressed that the benefit of practicing students' thinking skills was to make them realize their potentiality and understand the importance of English. Students would be motivated to learn English ultimately. Jack asserted that spending time on motivating students in learning is much more significant than teaching them content knowledge. Jack explained:

> Students have to express themselves in English to make their opinions clear to others in activities. During this process, they have to look up the unknown words and organize information in English sentences. The more students speak, the more they learn from the process. It was challenging at first, but students perform better by long-term practices. Seeing their improvement, students normally become motivated and confident in further studies. Once students become active in learning, they will ultimately be good at English.

The greatest moment that Jack enjoyed was when a student offered unique insights that he has not thought about. Jack provided positive feedback to students continuously to increase

their motivation in expressing personal ideas. He would either clarify students' ideas or expand

their conclusions when opinions were not successfully expressed.

Jack also encouraged students to make decisions by themselves. He noted that the

common characteristic among Chinese students was that they always followed the advice of

teachers and parents. Jack empowered students to make their own decisions to be more

independent. Jack explained:

> College students are grown-ups, and they need to be masters of their own fate. They
> listened to parents and teachers for a long time, and it is time to give them chances to
> make decisions for themselves. I want my students to be mentally independent. I offer
> them open-ended questions and ask them to choose extracurricular reading materials.
> They need to be the master of their own learning. I recommend students think of ideas to
> solve their problems, rather than simply turn to me for advice.

Jack was satisfied with his growth during the past eight years on his English proficiency,

communication abilities, and teaching skills. Meanwhile, Jack has developed into a patient,

empathetic, and experienced instructor. Jack defined the teaching process as an exploratory

process that requires the teacher to adjust to students' needs and characteristics. He was

appreciative of the fact that his students had helped him become a better instructor.

**Teacher Dispositions.**

***Being respectful and sincere to students requires humility, patience, and love.*** Jack

attributed his success in building rapport with students to his sincerity, patience, and humility.

He asserted that students know if a teacher really cares about them. Teachers should not pursue

on authoritarian philosophy in education. Times have changed. The truth is that college students

instill the latest information constantly into classes, which could be beneficial to teachers. Hence,

it is sensible for teachers to be humble, respectful and sincere to their students.

Students are different, so they deserve equity in education. Jack recalled that he was an

idealist when he was a novice teacher with a high expectation of himself as well as for his

students. Students were supposed to live up to Jack's expectations; otherwise, he would be disappointed. Gradually, Jack realized that students vary in learning abilities. Thereafter, he became more relaxed and provided students with individualized support by identifying specific problems and offering corresponding solutions.

To reach each student, Jack devoted a huge amount of time in patiently communicating with students based on the size of his classes. One way he enhanced communication with students was to write down comments to each student periodically. Another way was to initiate talks with students during break time to ask students' feedback and recommendations for his classes. Also, Jack invited students to contact him outside the classroom to communicate either online or in person.

In general, Jack put more efforts on students once he had realized they needed extra help and support. Based on students' scores in examinations, Jack talked privately to students who had lower scores to differentiate their personal needs and helped them. Not only did he help students in English, but he was also determined to increase their motivation and passion for English learning.

It is unavoidable that classroom conflicts occur between teacher and student, which happened to Jack. Jack stuck to his principle to maintain students' self-esteem and to avoid publicly embarrassing students when dealing with conflicts. He told a story:

> Chinese students highly value their grades; therefore, students always ask me about their scores. Class attendance takes up to 10% of their final scores, and I announced their scores in class attendance before the final examination publicly. A girl defended herself, saying she should get full points for attendance. Actually, I made a record that she was absent for classes on a specific day. However, she insisted she was present on that day and said her friends can prove it. I knew she was lying, but I did not want to humiliate her in front of her classmates. Then, I surrendered and admitted that maybe it was me who made a mistake publicly.

Because Jack loved his students, he did not want to hurt anybody. Jack felt powerless to confront this student because he has to make concessions to protect her self-esteem. Jack was confident that he took the right action to solve this problem. Jack hoped that students realize that he loves them more than grades. Meanwhile, Jack wanted to deliver a message to his students that he treats them fairly and sincerely.

Jack has committed to teaching as his lifelong profession, so he has dedicated himself to become a successful instructor. The undeniable problem is the large class size in China, thus Jack has struggled to find the most effective pedagogy that could fit into the Chinese educational system. Jack believes that theories in English teaching lay a theoretical foundation, but he has been keen on particular teaching methods and strategies that he can apply practically. The reformation in English education in China is under progress, and English teachers are eager for pedagogies that are suitable and effective for them to simulate in real practice.

## Cross-Case Analysis

Four participants were autonomy-supportive instructors offering a certain amount of autonomy to their students. They valued student engagement and appreciated the contribution students had made in teaching and learning. Even though working at two types of universities and teaching different students, four participants shared similarities as they embraced enthusiasm and challenges in teaching. They all fostered instructor-student relationships, increased students' motivation and aspirations in learning English, felt constrained by large class sizes, as well as fell short of pedagogical knowledge and technological support in teaching. However, they differed in their teaching goals and objectives, expectations, confidence, and requirements for their students. Table 8 demonstrates the similarities and differences among participants.

**Table 8:** *Similarities and Differences Across Cases*

| Similarities | Differences |
|---|---|
| • Lack of Pedagogical Knowledge and Technological Support<br>• Caring for Students<br>• Engagement and Empowerment<br>• Autonomy-Supportive Teaching<br>• Motivation and Aspirations in Learning English<br>• Enthusiasm in Teaching<br>• Constraints from Large Class Sizes | • Different Teaching Goals and Objectives<br>• Strictness Versus Lenience |

**Similarities Across Cases**

**Lack of Pedagogical Knowledge and Technological Support**. Limited pedagogical knowledge confines participants' restricted implementation of teaching methods. Besides traditional lecturing, participants employed similar class activities such as group work, class debate, class presentation, and role play. Nothing creative and stimulating existed in either class activities and lesson plans, except for dubbing video clips in Laura's classes. Four participants acknowledged that they lack pedagogical knowledge, and most of their teaching copies the way they were taught.

In marked contrast with the widespread use of digital devices among Chinese undergraduate students, none of these four teachers utilized advanced digital technologies, other than PowerPoint or Video Presentation, as an integral and interactive component to support teaching and learning at school. Mary expressed her opinion that a majority of professors of her age are used to using the chalkboard in teaching; for them technology is unnecessary. Younger instructors like Lily, Laura, and Jack, were willing to be creative and more effective in teaching and learning through digital devices. Nonetheless, they were unacquainted with educational technology, and training is highly required to address this gap.

**Caring for Students**. Four participants reached a consensus on the importance of building rapport with students, which has laid a foundation for students' engagement in English learning. Participants confirmed that students' psychological feeling of safety and belonging ultimately promote their participation in learning. Jack highlighted that Chinese students value their public image (i.e., *mianzi*) which concerns their personality and dignity. Shan (2015) summarizes that a recent survey conducted by China Youth Daily identified that 93% of the 1,150 respondents confirmed the importance of *mianzi,* while 75% of the total acknowledged that making mistakes in public is the most humiliating thing. To avoid students suffering public humiliation and saving their "*mianzi*," Mary, Lily, and Jack provided positive reinforcement in public and only offered critical feedback to students privately. The exception was Laura, who provided students with critical feedback in public but only after a positive compliment, keeping in line with her strictness to students. Four participants built a welcoming and caring learning environment for their students.

All four instructors highlighted students' needs to feel identifiable and valuable, thus they endeavored to remember all their students' names. Even though confronted with the same plight – lack of personal communication with individual students due to large class sizes – participants addressed it by communicating out of classroom either online or in person. Both Laura and Jack even provided students with individualized feedback in written form alongside verbal communication. No matter possessing strict or lenient educator personalities, all participants demonstrated their deep knowledge, understanding, and concern to each of their students to make them feel noticed, connected, and cared about.

**Engagement and Empowerment**. The four participants appreciated student engagement and believed that they constantly learned from their students. Treating students respectfully

encouraged them to participate in classes. This offered students opportunities to contribute to teaching and learning. What is more, students communicated in English in classes since they did not have many chances to use English outside the classes. Laura, Mary, and Lily identified that students are capable of receiving a variety of latest information. The information that students had gathered enriched classes. Jack believed the philosophy that teaching and learning are reciprocal, which make both teachers and students grow and develop simultaneously. Therefore, student engagement is a crucial component over the course of teaching and learning.

**Autonomy-Supportive Teaching**. Students received a fair amount of freedom in participants' classes, particularly in class assignments. Students in both schools preferred assignments that offering them autonomy, thus students were able to display their talents in other domains not simply in English competency. Laura, Mary, and Lily agreed that the more freedom that students embrace, the better their performances are in class activities.

Jack believed that it was his responsibility to cultivate his students' abilities in autonomous and critical learning, which are crucial to prepare them for the real world. He expounded that for many years Chinese students have been educated through the spoon-feeding teaching methods so they can achieve high grades and get enrolled in higher education. As a result, students are well trained in examinations whereas deficient in critical thinking and autonomous learning.

**Motivation and Aspirations in Learning English**. Teaching non-English majors, four participants struggled with the same challenge to discover motivational factors to increase students' volition in learning English. They affirmed that students performed differently in classes due to their motivation in learning English. Laura acknowledged a sharp distinction between students' performances in classes between medical students and chemistry students. She

explained that medical students have realized the primary role English can play in their future careers, whereas chemistry students could not capture the significance of English. Correspondingly, Mary, Lily, and Jack encountered similar experiences with students' discrepancy in class performances.

Three participants utilized the same strategy to invoke students' motivation, which was a repeated exhortation on the worldwide utilization of English. Jack always spent the first class period each semester to exchange ideas with his students on their individualized goals in learning English. Both Lily and Mary admitted that they had had to constantly badger the importance of English to enhance students' motivation in learning English. Ultimately, three participants wanted their students to work hard on the courses they taught.

In contrast, Laura expressed her concern that current English curriculum design cannot fulfill a new generation of students' needs in learning English, while a reform is keenly demanded to hear the voices from both current undergraduate students and teachers. Therefore, she barely persuaded her students on the importance of English courses because she's been struggling to convince herself first. Instead, Laura emphasized how assignments that she designed have helped students improve their English.

**Enthusiasm in Teaching**. Four participants treated their students with respect and caring, and they enjoyed their work with a commitment to select teaching as a lifetime profession. The three instructors, along with Mary who was an associate professor, were all striving to end their career as professors. With a determination to become experts in teaching English, the four participants were dedicated to improving their professional knowledge to achieve better teaching results through reading along with attending seminars and workshops. Being enthusiastic about their teaching, none of these four teachers expressed any negative

emotions such as feeling uninspired and bored at work. Instead, they have achieved a sense of fulfillment by working with their students.

**Constraints from Large Class Sizes**. The same complaint came from these four participants: the large class size. A great number of students were accepted to universities and colleges in China resulting from the massification of higher education. The official website of Zhengzhou University indicates that there are approximately 54,000 undergraduate students in this elite public university. Sias International University, a private university, has around 27,000 on-campus students pursuing bachelor's degrees. Due to the large student populations, all participants taught English classes with more than 50 students.

Figure 2 and Figure 3 are pictures taken from Laura's and Mary's classes at Zhengzhou University. Figure 4 and Figure 5 are pictures of Lily's and Jack's classes at Sias International University. Notable are nonremovable desks and benches with more than 50 students sitting inside.

**Figure 2:** *Laura's English Class*



**Figure 3:** *Mary's English Class*

**Figure 4:** *Lily's English Class*　　　　**Figure 5:** *Jack's English Class*

　　　　

The settings of classrooms and the high number of student populations impede the implementation of certain class activities that require students moving around and participating in group activities. In many instances, teachers have to work in the aisles to be close to students. Meanwhile, the large number of students makes it impossible to reach every student inside the classroom. Therefore, most of the students experience anonymity in classes. Consequently, anonymity impacts student engagement. Furthermore, classroom management becomes another concern when implementing class activities.

**Differences Across Cases**

**Different Teaching Goals and Objectives**. Both Laura and Mary affirmed that students' grades are indicators of their current learning results but should not be set as an educational goal in teaching. They hoped that students would achieve high grades in examinations, but they valued students' improvement and efforts in learning as well. Laura highlighted the preparation of English for students' future development.

Mary treated English linguistic knowledge as the fundamental teaching requirement; whereas, fostering a sense of cross-cultural communication and cultivating various thinking modes should also be valued as teaching goals.

Lily dedicated to improving students' grades in national English examinations, emphasizing grades as important indicators to assess students' learning achievement as well as teachers' teaching results. In sharp contrast, Jack highlighted the importance of motivation, aspirations, and improvement in English learning while neglecting students' examination scores. Jack believed that students should not be judged by their scores; therefore, scores are not important. Instead, students' learning and thinking abilities are vital to their future career. He believed that good grades come naturally to students with a strong motivation and aspiration to learn.

**Strictness Versus Lenience**. Even though four participants agreed upon the fact that students' English proficiency confines the implementation of pedagogical practices, they hold various expectations and confidence toward their students. Mary, Lily, and Jack arranged class activities that require students' good command of English, such as class debates and essay writing, to students in advanced English classes other than regular English classes. Laura, by comparison, insisted on employing the same teaching methods for all her students, even though the teaching results were disparate. Laura admitted that she felt frustrated when students had failed her expectations, but she believed that she could bring out the best in her students by expecting and demanding high standards. Whereas Mary, Lily, and Jack did not want to push students beyond their limits to make them feel uncomfortable and stressful.

Four teachers were distinct in their characteristics in teaching. Laura and Lily were strict instructors with certain expectations of their students. They both confirmed that strict teachers

produce outstanding students since positive pressure leads to improvement. Laura and Lily set up specific rules and routines and provided students with rubrics to evaluate their performances. In contrast, Mary and Jack were lenient with their students. They cared about students' overall performances and were indulgent in grading their students because they knew students are keen for high grades. Mary and Jack lowered their expectations to enhance students' fulfillment to increase their motivation in learning.

Participants identified three main issues that should be addressed in English education in China. Various teaching methods should be created to correspond with the Chinese educational structure – that of a large class size and limited classroom resources. The other one was to discover ways to encourage students to actively engage inside the classroom other than passively. Last but not least, what is needed is to enhance English instructors' knowledge of educational technology.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter elaborated findings to address research questions using a thematic description by identifying two themes respectively to each participant. It then summarized similarities and differences among themes across four cases. Commonalities existed in participants' enthusiasm for teaching, their appreciation of student engagement, students' autonomy, and instructor-student rapport. Participants struggled with identical problems in motivating students as well as being confined by large class size, technological support, and limited pedagogical knowledge. Differences were demonstrated in their teaching ends, expectations, confidence, and requirements to their students. Participants recommended creating pedagogical practices and implementing technical support which can fit into the current situation of education in China to actively engage students in classes.

# Chapter 5 - CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter comprises a discussion of research findings on participants' pedagogical practices and instructor-student relationships in tertiary institutions in China and specifically findings that target student engagement in English education. This study connected to the literature on student engagement inside the classroom, as well as Self-Determination Theory (SDT). This chapter also elaborates on implications and possibilities that may be valuable to current and future English educators in China based on the findings from this study. This chapter concludes with limitations of this study, as well as recommendations and suggestions for future research.

Two research questions that this qualitative case study was designed to address were:

1. What are the experiences of the four Chinese instructors of English as they engaged students in classes?

2. What are the experiences of the four Chinese instructors of English regarding their relationship building with students?

Major findings of this study indicate that the four participants shared commonalities on embracing enthusiasm and autonomy-supportiveness in teaching, fostering instructor-student rapport, stimulating students' motivation and aspirations in learning English, being constrained by large class sizes, as well as falling short of pedagogical knowledge and technological support in teaching. However, participants held various teaching goals and objectives, expectations, confidence, and requirements of their students.

## Interpretation of the Findings

A gap existed between participants' expectations for their English classes and the reality of the experience. The challenges included the students' English proficiency, teacher lack of

pedagogical knowledge, and large class sizes. Participants expressed their hope for student-centered classes with lots of student engagement and contribution in classes, which is consistent with the requirements from the *Guidelines on College English Teaching* issued in 2015, shifting from traditional teacher-centered curriculum and pedagogy to students' autonomy in learning (Liu, 2011; Xu & Fan, 2017). In real practice, interactive lecturing on English linguistic knowledge took the majority of class time, wherein students were most likely to be asked to passively engage in classes by answering questions to align with the examination-oriented educational system in China. Halpin (2014) defined this pedagogy as "interactive whole class teaching" being widely used among Chinese teachers.

In terms of the first research question, none of the four participants defined their role as an authoritative information giver; instead, they treated themselves as designers, organizers, facilitators, counselors, and resource. They were responsible to design and organize class activities, facilitate students to meet their expectations, as well as behave as a counselor and resource to whom students could turn. Participants cultivated an interactive learning environment to foster student engagement. These findings are consistent with previous research studies conducted by both Yan (2012) and Alonazi (2017). Yan (2012) elaborates on teachers' roles as manager, organizer, facilitator, and counselor to foster students' learning autonomy. Alonazi (2017) surveyed 60 English teachers in Saudi Arabia and discovered that teachers play the role of not only a knowledge provider, but also as a facilitator, manager, resource and counselor.

The level of student engagement in classes relies on teachers' beliefs in English teaching. Laura's English classes were the most engaging among the four participants because she emphasized the practical use of English. Laura designed various class activities to offer students chances to practice English. Mary and Jack endeavored to develop students' critical thinking

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ability by eliciting students' ideas, whereas treating English linguistic knowledge as a fundamental requirement in English teaching. Therefore, interactive lecturing and student engagement took less class time. Lily's goal was to achieve better grades in high stake tests which resulted in an emphasis on transmitting linguistic knowledge and drills for examination preparation. These findings align with Penner (1995), who argues that that a teacher's beliefs in teaching and learning lead to his/her selections in pedagogy. Only the learning environment and teaching methods are the results of teaching philosophies.

Students' motivation in learning English is an important perceived influence on student engagement. Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that people value motivation because of the consequences it produces. Participants devoted to enhancing students' motivation achieved the desired result — an increase in engagement and better academic performance. Ryan and Deci (2000) further confirm that people can be motivated through either intrinsic motivation or extrinsic motivation. Participants cannot force students to study hard on English; instead they must continually convince them of the importance of English by telling them of its widespread use.

Participants hope that students will become aware of the importance of English by instilling them with the idea that English is a widely used language, and students should learn from them. However, expounding on the importance of English is often ineffective because some non-English majors still cannot realize the value of learning English based on its infrequent use in their daily lives (Wei & Su, 2012). Participants also set grades as a tangible reward to increase students' motivation in engagement which appears to be effective. None of the four participants discussed how they implement various teaching strategies to invoke students' intrinsic motivation in English learning because of lack of adequate pedagogical knowledge.

Participants showed a clear preference for arranging class activities to increase student engagement. Partially because of being raised in a collectivist culture and with a concern for their public image, Chinese students prefer to work and perform as a group rather than individually. When class activities were implemented, students at both schools preferred creative, novel, and empowering group work, wherein students could demonstrate their imagination and talents holistically, not merely confined to English proficiency. In contrast, students disliked repetitive and constricted activities such as making a dialogue or reading. These findings are consistent with Smith et al. (2005) that cooperative learning is a good classroom-based method to enhance student engagement.

Participants acknowledged that they were thwarted by students' English proficiency, large class sizes, and lack of pedagogical knowledge and training. Students' English proficiency decided the implementation of certain class activities and influenced student engagement in learning. Lily admitted that she allowed students to speak Chinese in activities like group debates to make them go smoothly because students could not fully express themselves in English. Jack arranged class activities like group debates or creative writing to sophomores only because most freshmen were not capable of completing them in English. Likewise, Huang, Liu, Wang, Tsai, & Lin (2017) identified a significant correlation between students' English proficiency level and their engagement in learning activities. Complaints from a large class size and a lack of pedagogical knowledge and training were also discovered from research studies conducted by Deng & Carless (2010), Lee (2009), and Liu (2002).

In terms of the second research question, participants emphasized students' feeling of being cared for and noticed more than spending time in relationship building. Participants Laura and Lily confirmed that they spent little time in relationship building with their students, but they

felt sure that every student was known and valuable to them. To achieve this result, the secret that four participants shared in common was by either identifying students' names or providing students individual feedback. The findings suggest that instructor-student relationship is a motivational factor for student engagement, which is in line with Frisby & Martin (2010), Frisby & Myers (2008), and van Uden et al. (2014). The four participants built positive student-instructor relationships through out-of-class communication instead of within the classroom. Participants provided students with their contact information and welcomed students to turn to them when needed.

Treating students fairly and respectfully was the other way participants enhanced positive relationships with students. The bottom line that every participant emphasized was never to embarrass any student in public. Shan (2015) described that Chinese students value their public image and treat making mistakes in public as the most humiliating thing. Therefore, participants offered positive feedback to students in public while giving critical feedback in private. The findings also demonstrated that participants valued students' opinions and provided them autonomy in their learning.

Even though these findings were generally compatible with previous research, the most appealing findings came from participant Laura, who was at odds with my expectations. My assumption was that close instructor-student relationships and a lenient learning environment produced better results in student engagement because it met the psychological needs of relatedness and autonomy to a greater extent. Laura felt the opposite by focusing more on class design rather than on building relationships with her students. Laura also set up high expectations and strict requirements for students. She kept pushing and challenging her students to achieve better performance without considering individual differences. Despite the fact that

she spent the least time and energy in relationship building with students and was strict and critical with her students, she gained the highest mean scores in student surveys (Table 7) on evaluating the student-instructor relationship and student engagement, which contradicts my assumptions.

The other interesting result was discovered from the comparison of student survey scores among the four participants (Table 7). Besides Laura, Lily was another relatively strict teacher among the four participants. In contrast, Mary and Jack were lenient to students and advocated offering students more freedom. The two teachers lowered their expectations and requirements based on students' English proficiency. They were supposed to get higher scores in the student survey because of the needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy identified from SDT; however, Laura and Lily received relatively higher scores than Mary and Jack.

These findings lead to further inquiries – do Chinese students most prefer a strict or a lenient teaching style? Do Chinese students prefer a strict teaching style based on their educational background and because they are not used to being offered too much freedom in learning? Are Chinese students more concerned about their grades in high stake tests or their learning process inside the classroom? Do Chinese students appreciate their engagement in classes? Which pedagogical practice is more prevalent – to invoke students' intrinsic motivation to participate in classes or to develop student rapport with instructors? How can we as educators most effectively move Chinese students from years of passive learning to autonomous learning?

## Implications for Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) was initially developed by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan (2000) while analyzing the quality and sources of human motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that the satisfaction of the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and

relatedness yields a high quality of intrinsic self-motivation to engage in activities, which is cross-culturally applicable. The psychological need of autonomy is the need to feel capable to initiate and manage behaviors autonomously (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence refers to being effective in exercising and extending personal capacities to seek out optimal challenges (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relatedness means the emotional closeness to others interpersonally and being involved in a caring relationship (Deci & Ryan, 1991).

Research findings from this study of Chinese teachers of English are broadly in harmony with SDT. For example, students prefer class activities that empower them with freedom and creativity instead of those with specific requirements. Participants identified role play as students' favorite activity not simply because of the autonomy students embrace but the chance to demonstrate their talents. Students, especially those who are not proficient in English, can show their capacities in other aspects rather than English in a role play, which makes them feel competent. Laura identified that her students like the class activity of dubbing movie clips because of the sense of achievement and competition embedded in it. All four participants created a caring and welcoming learning environment to engage students.

These findings also consistent with previous research. Jang et al. (2009) tested SDT on Korean students and proved that the basic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are salient with satisfying learning experiences. Klem & Connell (2004) confirmed that teacher support highly associates with student engagement – teacher support creates a caring, well-structured learning environment that expects higher student engagement.

## Limitations of the Study

This study primarily investigated instructors' perspectives on student engagement and relationship building with students, which means conclusions were drawn based upon

*instructors'* beliefs, explanations, and evaluations. What we do not know is whether students agree with their teachers' perceptions and how students actually interpret and report their experiences and engagement in English learning. Not having this important information limits this study. Therefore, research studies exploring Chinese students' reflections on their engagement in learning are worthy of future study.

The other limitation of this study is that data were gathered from two different English courses – Comprehensive English as well as English Listening and Speaking. The possibilities are that various teaching content and requirements might influence instructors' pedagogy and students' expectations in classes. Therefore, the comparability of data is not strong enough to make conclusions.

Small samples limit the generality of the findings of this study. This research shows participants' incongruent understandings of student engagement and their various ways to facilitate student engagement, but four participants' understandings and explanations cannot be generalized because of the complexity and divergent methodologies teachers utilized in English teaching. What is more, four participants are teaching in Henan Province which means the results of this study do not represent the whole educational status quo in China. In order to capture a holistic understanding of student engagement in postsecondary English classes in China, investigation into the perspectives of instructors working in other provinces are required to better understand how to best facilitate student engagement.

## Implications and Recommendations for Practice

This research is significant because it identifies the trend and problems that exist in college English teaching, plus it offers practical guidance to English educators to foster student engagement. Apparently, participants have discarded teacher-centered English classes wherein

teachers perform the sole traditional role as a knowledge transmitter. Instead, they have realized the importance of student engagement and are embarked on engaging students inside classes. Nevertheless, there are problems that need to be addressed, such as a lack of pedagogical knowledge, large class sizes, limited technical support, and resistance from the examination-oriented educational system to best facilitate student engagement.

One implication of the findings of this study is to guide teachers through building rapport with students by emphasizing the importance of making each individual student feel known and valued, especially in large classes. Memorizing students' names and providing students personalized feedback either verbally or in writing can be effective in eliminating students' anonymity among peers. Building positive relationships with students also lies in the effort to treat them fairly and respectfully. To avoid humiliating students publicly shows a teacher's respect for students; therefore, it is be better to provide students critical feedback in private rather than publicly.

Research findings affirm that Chinese students can be engaged when they are protected, motivated, and interested. Creating a welcoming learning environment and one free of teacher criticism lays a solid foundation to foster student engagement. Participants confirm that grades are a good extrinsic motivation to student engagement, whereas expounding on the importance of English is ineffective. Class activities are testified to be effective in engaging students in classes. Students are interested in creative and empowering group activities rather than individual work; thus, teachers demand corresponding pedagogical knowledge. Research findings demonstrate that participants' pedagogical practices are confined to traditional methods such as group discussion, class debate, and role play. There is a need to develop creative and empowering class

activities suitable for large classes to enhance student English proficiency. What is more, pedagogy for effectively teaching English in large classes is demanded as well.

The findings of this study provide a crucial recommendation for practice and policy in teacher credentialing in China. Participants admitted that their teaching methods were mainly adopted from their former teachers or colleagues because they had not received any pedagogical training before starting their teaching careers. Participants explained that strong English proficiency is the only standard set up to become an English instructor. Therefore, a certain amount of pedagogical training should be implemented in teacher preparation programs to ensure teacher candidates are licensed and prepared in pedagogy. Meanwhile, to improve teaching and learning, administration in higher education must require regular compulsory professional training. Specifically, professional training needs to demonstrate teachers how to implement various teaching methods in real classes instead of illustrating vague and broad theoretical concepts.

Findings of this study also support the argument for a change in national English curriculum in higher education in China. Participants acknowledged that the current English curriculum is neither attractive nor effective in preparing students for the authentic use of English in the real world. A change in the English curriculum is needed to link feedback from undergraduate students, English instructors, and curriculum experts to create a more sustainable, relevant, and inclusive English curriculum.

This study makes a disclosure that educational technology lags far behind, especially when compared to the widespread use of digital devices in China. Participants merely utilize plain PowerPoint as a media to display teaching contents. There is a need to cultivate English instructors' skills in educational technology to support instructional objectives, which ultimately

will lead to better teaching results in the four basic language skills — listening, speaking, reading, and writing in a multimedia learning environment.

## Suggestions for Future Research

It would be necessary to examine if engaged pedagogy can help students increase their standardized English test scores in future research. China's examination-oriented education emphasizes student grades. Therefore, Chinese instructors of English would not discard lecturing and drills in English linguist knowledge without empirical research into the correlational relationship between engaged pedagogy and student academic performance in standardized tests.

This study is restricted to English instructors' perceptions of student engagement and relationship building. Possible areas for future studies include the examination of actual student engagement and instructor-student relationship reported by students themselves. Furthermore, it would be interesting to link results from both instructors and students to identify the most engaging pedagogy. Studies are also needed to identify which pedagogical practices in engaging students are the most educational and fruitful for English learning.

To expand the generalizability of research results, researchers would find it necessary to encourage more English instructors from different provinces to share their insights and experiences in student engagement and relationship building with their students in future research. Meanwhile, it would be more beneficial to English instructors if pedagogical practices were summarized and analyzed to identify their implementation in specific English courses.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter elaborated on the research findings regarding English instructors' perceptions and understandings on student engagement and instructor-student relationship. Research findings demonstrate that students need to feel identifiable and respectfully treated to

build a positive instructor-student relationship. Findings of this study confirm that student engagement can be fostered when students are protected, interested, and motivated; however, teachers' beliefs in English teaching, pedagogical knowledge, and extrinsic constraints restrain the achievement in student engagement. Therefore, this study points out the need to reform national English curriculum and teacher credentialing. What is more, linking interpretations and future investigations on students' opinions of engagement is needed to identify the most engaging pedagogy. Empirical research evaluating the correlational relationship between student engagement and academic performance is also demanded to confirm the efficiency of pedagogy on student learning.

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# Appendix A -

# INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL LETTER

**KANSAS STATE** | University Research Compliance Office
**U N I V E R S I T Y**

TO: Dr. Debbie Mercer            Proposal Number: 9282
        Dean of Education
        006 Bluemont Hall

FROM: Rick Scheidt, Chair
          Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 04/27/2018

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "Student Engagement in Postsecondary English Classes in China: The Teachers' Perspective."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for <u>one year</u> from the date of this correspondence, pending "continuing review."**

APPROVAL DATE:    04/27/2018

EXPIRATION DATE:   04/27/2019

Several months prior to the expiration date listed, the IRB will solicit information from you for federally mandated **"continuing review" of the research.** Based on the review, the IRB may approve the activity for another year. **If continuing IRB approval is <u>not</u> granted, or the IRB fails to perform the continuing review before the expiration date noted above, the project will expire and the activity involving human subjects must be terminated on that date. Consequently, it is critical that you are responsive to the IRB request for information for continuing review if you want your project to continue.**

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

☒ There is no more than minimal risk to the subjects.
☐ There is greater than minimal risk to the subjects.

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review at least annually, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

203 Fairchild Hall, Lower Mezzanine, 1601 Vattier St., Manhattan, KS 66506-1103 | 785-532-3224 | fax: 785-532-3278
comply@k-state.edu | k-state.edu/research/comply

# Appendix B - PHONE/EMAIL SOLICITATION

Dear ***,

My name is Yuanyuan Zhao. I worked at Sias International University in Zhengzhou for eight years as an English instructor. In Aug. 2015, I went to the U.S. to pursue my Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. I am currently a doctoral student in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Kansas State University.

I would like to conduct a survey with your students regarding student engagement and student-instructor relationship. I was given your name by the Dean of College of Foreign Languages because of your excellent achievement in teaching.

I sincerely hope that you are willing to let me conduct this survey with your students. If you are interested in participating, please contact Yuanyuan Zhao at [yuanyu6@ksu.edu](mailto:yuanyu6@ksu.edu) or 15225189777.

I deeply appreciate your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Yuanyuan Zhao

# Appendix C - STUDENT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**QUESTIONNAIRE ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND RAPPORT**

I am conducting a survey on student engagement and students' relationship with the English teacher. Your voluntary participation is requested so we may learn more about the attitudes and behaviors regarding your engagement in English classes. This anonymous questionnaire will take approximately 20 minutes. Your participation is voluntary, and if you are willing to participate, please sign this form.

I want to stress that your participation in this study is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

If you have any questions pertaining this study, please contact Yuanyuan Zhao, Telephone 1522-518-9777.

Please sign and date below indicating your agreement to participate in this survey.


Thank you for your assistance.


_____          _____

Participant Signature                                      Date

# Appendix D -

## STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND RAPPORT QUESTIONNAIRE

For each of the following statements, please indicate whether you: Strongly Agree (5); Somewhat Agree (4); Neither Agree Nor Disagree (3); Somewhat Disagree (2); Strongly Disagree (1) by check marks. This survey is confidential, so do not be afraid to provide your authentic feedback.

| No. | Items | Responses | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 1 | In thinking about my relationship with my instructor, I enjoy interacting with her/him. | | | | | |
| 2 | My instructor creates a feeling of "warmth" in our relationship. | | | | | |
| 3 | My instructor relates well to me. | | | | | |
| 4 | In thinking about this relationship, I have a harmonious relationship with my instructor. | | | | | |
| 5 | My instructor has a good sense of humor. | | | | | |
| 6 | I am comfortable interacting with my instructor. | | | | | |
| 7 | I feel like there is a "bond" between my instructor and myself. | | | | | |
| 8 | I look forward to seeing my instructor in class. | | | | | |
| 9 | I strongly care about my instructor. | | | | | |
| 10 | My instructor has taken a personal interest in me. | | | | | |
| 11 | I have a close relationship with my instructor. | | | | | |
| 12 | The class is more engaging than traditional classroom instruction. | | | | | |
| 13 | This class gives me greater opportunities to communicate with other students. | | | | | |
| 14 | I feel that this class has improved my English. | | | | | |
| 15 | I am more motivated to learn English in this class. | | | | | |
| 16 | I listen attentively to the instructor during class. | | | | | |
| 17 | I ask questions in the classroom. | | | | | |

| No. | Items | Responses | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 18 | I enjoy learning new things in class. | | | | | |
| 19 | When we work on something in class, I feel encouraged. | | | | | |
| 20 | I talk about the course material with others outside of class. | | | | | |
| 21 | I ask myself questions to make sure I know the material that I have been studying. | | | | | |
| 22 | I think about how I can utilize the course material in everyday life. | | | | | |
| 23 | When I have a class project, I plan out how I am going to do it. | | | | | |
| 24 | I pay attention in class. | | | | | |
| 25 | I participate during class discussions by sharing my thoughts/opinions. | | | | | |
| 26 | When I read the lesson, I ask myself questions to make sure I understand what it is about. | | | | | |
| 27 | The tests in my class do a good job of measuring what I am able to do. | | | | | |
| 28 | In my class, I do more than required. | | | | | |
| 29 | I enjoy discussing topics with my peers. | | | | | |
| 30 | The class makes me want to learn more about English. | | | | | |

# Appendix E - CONSENT FORM

**PROJECT TITLE:**

Student Engagement in Postsecondary English Classes in China: The Teachers' Perspective

**PROJECT APPROVAL DATE:** 4/27/2018    **PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE:** 4/27/2019    **LENGTH OF STUDY:** 12 month

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Dr. Debbie Mercer

**CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):** Yuanyuan Zhao

**CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:** Yuanyuan Zhao
Cell Number: 15225189777; 7857063954
Email: yuanyu6@ksu.edu

**IRB CHAIR CONTACT NFORMATION:**
Rick Scheidt
Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects
203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506
(785) 532-3224

Cheryl Doerr
Associate Vice President for Research Compliance
203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506
(785) 532-3224.

**PROJECT SPONSOR:** None

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:**

The purpose of this study is to explore four experienced college-level English teachers' experiences in engaging students inside classrooms in the Henan province in China through three perspectives: student-relationship building, pedagogical practices and teachers' dispositions. Because of the diversity among the elements mentioned above, these issues call for additional investigation with detailed description of how successful English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers implement strategies, methods and other skills to fully engage students in their classes in Chinese higher educational context.

**PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:**

The research design is a qualitative case study using inductive analysis approach.
There will be three class observations for each participant within one month, once a week in May and June 2018. The observation will be implemented in authentic English classes in China. The participants will be asked to employ pedagogical practices to engage students in class when being observed.
For each participant, two informal conversations and two semi-structured interviews will be conducted in May and June 2018. The aim of first informal conversation at the beginning of study is to gain a glimpse of the participants' personal educational background, teaching philosophies and attitudes towards students' engagement in class and student instructor relationship. The next informal conversation will be at the end of the study, focusing on our reflective questions and thoughts about this study. Two semi-structured interviews will be guided by twenty interview questions on discover participants' educational philosophy, conceptions on student-centered teaching, pedagogical practices, and their rapport with students.

**ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES OR TREATMENTS, IF ANY, THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO SUBJECT:**

None

**RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:**

Potential risks for participating this study might be feeling uncomfortable answering some questions and concerning about their performance during class observation. Yet, all those risks are no more dangerous than what a participant might experience in daily lives. The risk of this study is minimal. If participants experience any discomfort or inconvenience during the interviews and class observations, they are free to withdraw without any penalty. Participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any point in the study

**BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:**

The results of this study provide Chinese English teachers examples and guidance in how to employ various teaching methods to meet the needs from SDT to engage students in classes. Meanwhile, it guides English teachers to the fulfillment of the needs for innovation of instructional approaches.

**EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:**

Confidentiality will be maintained and pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants. Four separate password-protected files under participants' pseudonyms will be created to keep all the data from each participant and stored on a password-protected computer for the three years KSU requires it to be stored.

**IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS?** ☐ Yes    ☑ No

**PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS:**

**PARENT/GUARDIAN APPROVAL SIGNATURE:**                                            Date:

Terms of participation:  I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary.  I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

(Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant).

**PARTICIPANT NAME:**

**PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE:**                                                                      Date:

**WITNESS TO SIGNATURE: (PROJECT STAFF)**                                      Date:

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# Appendix F -

# SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND MATRIX

| Question No. | Teaching Philosophy (Attitudes toward Student Engagement) | Pedagogical Practice (Research Question 1) | Student-Instructor Relationship (Research Question 2) | Specific Questions |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | √ | √ | √ | What is the best thing about teaching English? |
| 2 | √ | | | What is your fundamental belief of teaching and learning in your English language classroom? |
| 3 | √ | √ | √ | What are your specific goals in your English classes? |
| 4 | √ | √ | | What student behaviors are most valued in your English classes? |
| 5 | √ | √ | √ | What do you think motivates the students to learn content materials from class the most? |
| 6 | | √ | √ | How do you understand each individual student's needs as a whole person in a large class? |
| 7 | | √ | | How do you adjust your teaching according to individual's needs in a large class? For example, how do you assist the struggling students? The above-average students? |
| 8 | | √ | √ | What would you say are the top few challenges that you face as an English teacher in your particular school? |
| 9 | | √ | | May we take a look at your planning book? Can you explain how you plan your lessons? |
| 10 | | √ | √ | How do you build up a learning community for student-student and student-teacher interactions |

| Question No. | Teaching Philosophy (Attitudes toward Student Engagement) | Pedagogical Practice (Research Question 1) | Student-Instructor Relationship (Research Question 2) | Specific Questions |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | in which students are willing to speak English? |
| 11 | | √ | √ | How do you feel that your students are doing in class? |
| 12 | | √ | √ | What do you think gets in the ways of students' true learning? |
| 13 | | √ | | Would you please tell me a story of a time when students were engaged in your class? |
| 14 | | √ | √ | What specific strategies do you use to foster engagement in classes? |
| 15 | | √ | √ | Is there any difficulty in encouraging students engage in your class? If yes, what are the difficulties? |
| 16 | | | √ | What strategies do you use to encourage *student-instructor* interactions? What are the barriers during the relationship building process if any? |
| 17 | | √ | | What strategies do you use to encourage *student-student* interactions? What are the barriers in using such teaching strategies if any? |
| 18 | | √ | | What class activities do the students seem to most enjoy? Why? |
| 19 | | √ | | What class activities do the students seem to least enjoy? Why? |
| 20 | √ | √ | √ | Is there anything else that you want to share with me regarding English teaching and student engagement? |

# Appendix G - OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

**The Behavior Engagement Related to Instruction (BERI) Observation Protocol**

**Observation Protocol**

Date of Observation _____    Course Name, Number and Section _____

Instructor(s) _____    Classroom Number _____

Estimate of Class Attendance: _____

Position in class: (drawing a diagram of the class may be useful)

Notes on classroom environment: (i.e., description of space and seating arrangement, abnormal temperature, use of technology).

Brief description of instructional method: (i.e., traditional lecture mixed with clicker questions).

***Notes about group of students being observed (based on "descriptions of student in-class behaviors that indicate they are engaged/disengaged in Table 3 and Table 4).***

*Note.* Adapted from "A new tool for measuring student behavioral engagement in large university classes," by E. S. Lane, & S. E. Harris, 2015, *Journal of College Science Teaching, 44*(6), p. 86.