

Language learning in China: The experience of four learners

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ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates the usefulness of accounts of individual learning experience with reference to the language learning experience of four learners in China. There are three parts in the paper. First, the current emphasis on the pedagogical usefulness of such accounts is traced from the movement to focus on the learner from the 1960s to more recent discussions of learner autonomy and learner identity alongside the renewed interest in (auto)biographical approaches in research on learning and learners. Secondly, with reference to such theoretical considerations and a brief review of language policy in China, accounts of learning experiences based on excerpts from interviews of four Chinese learners from different backgrounds are presented to illustrate how they serve as windows to aspects of language education such as: policy changes over time as well as more individual learning circumstances. Thirdly, the paper concludes with a few suggestions on how language educators can collect and make use of such learning accounts for pedagogical purposes.

Introduction

In the last fifty years, both in theoretical explorations and in pedagogical practice, there has been a consistent shift of focus from the teacher to the learner. This focus on learners as individuals has occurred alongside a revival of interest in qualitative methods in research. It is now contended that qualitative accounts of individual experiences of a phenomenon may be as illuminating as a collective sketch based on quantitative data on a number of individuals (Chamberlayne, Bornat, & Wengraf, 2000). At the very least, it is now usually accepted that qualitative accounts of the learning experience of individual learners provide a useful complement to findings based on quantitative data. In a recent study of language education in China, I interviewed 52 learners on their language learning experience to complement survey results on 475 learners (Lam, in press). This paper is based on interviews of four learners selected from this data pool to illustrate how accounts of the learning experience of individual learners can be used by language educators to track the effects of language policy as well as to understand individual learning circumstances. There are three parts in the paper. First, the current emphasis on the pedagogical usefulness of such accounts is traced from the movement to focus on the learner from the 1960s to more recent discussions of learner autonomy and learner identity as well as the use of individual accounts of learning experience as a research tool. Secondly, with reference to this theoretical background and a brief review of language policy in

China, accounts of learning experience based on excerpts from interviews of the four learners are presented to exemplify how accounts of individual learning experience can provide insights to some aspects of language education. Thirdly, the paper concludes with a few suggestions on how language educators can collect and make use of such learning narratives for pedagogical purposes. The suggestions could prove useful to educational policy makers, teacher trainers as well as teachers.

Focus on the learner and learners' experience

In the last half century, the focus in pedagogy has shifted from the teacher to the learner. A good teacher is one who can enhance learning in and outside the classroom. The 1960s saw the development of the basis of "humanistic education", or education from the perspective of learners as people (Tudor, 1996, p. 3). It began with Rogers' (1961) *On becoming a person* and ended with Maslow's (1970) *Motivation and personality*. The ideological position of treating learners as people and learning as personal development came to the forefront. Tracking the development of learner-centredness from the 1960s, Tudor (1996, p. 1) points out that "this grew out of dissatisfaction with 'traditional' language teaching practice." For teaching to be effective, teachers must be able to respond to learners as people. Some of the methods based on this humanistic orientation such as the Counselling-Learning Method are reviewed in books on teaching methods such as Stevick (1980) or Oller and Richard-Amato (1983) among many others. It was not a big step to move from respecting learners as people to making sure that teaching should aim at meeting learners' needs. By the 1970s, an analysis of learners' needs had become one of the standard procedures in curriculum design in the mainstream approach of Communicative Language Teaching. At the same time, research on learning strategies begun even before the 1980s became firmly established throughout that decade; by 1990, Oxford's influential book, *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*, was published. In parallel, the belief that the more independent learners are, the better they learn soon became consolidated into models of learner autonomy (Benson & Voller, 1997; Cotterall & Crabbe, 1999; Dam, 1995; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Sinclair, McGrath, & Lamb, 2000). Not only must learners be independent in the way they learn, they must also take charge of their own learning because essentially, each learner is an autonomous learning entity with individualized learning goals and individual learning processes and outcomes. Since the end of the 1990s and certainly by the start of the 21st century, the paradigm has shifted even more to the learner's end in the form of interest in learner identity (Norton & Toohey, 2002); it is held that learners learning a new language are not just learning how to use that language; they are in the process of developing a new identity. To the extent that they can be successful in the negotiation of their new identity in the light of their existing identity, they will be successful in their learning of a target language.

Parallel to this increasing emphasis on learners as individuals is the use of a range of qualitative methods to arrive at accounts of their learning, which may be autobiographical or biographical. Autobiographical accounts refer to accounts

from the learners themselves, either in the form of keeping a diary or journal (Bell, 1997; Oxford et al., 1996; Schumann, 1997) on their learning experience as they learn a language or in the form of oral or written recollections of their learning experience produced at a later date (Oxford et al., 1996). Biographical accounts refer to accounts produced by writers other than the learners themselves. Accounts elicited by interviews and then written up by researchers fall somewhere in between, depending on how much subjectivity researchers introduce into the selection or editing of interview excerpts for the accounts of the learners' experiences (see Benson & Nunan, 2002 & 2005 for recent discussions of learners' experiences from different contexts).

Whether the account is written up by the learner or the researcher, it has been observed that the very act of having to narrate the experience or 'tell the story' of learning is in itself instrumental in enhancing the learning identity of the learner because it requires the narrator to reconstruct "the links between past, present, and future" and to impose "coherence where there was none" (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2003, p. 18). This renewed interest in the use of accounts of learning experience in research in language learning can be aligned with the biographical turn in social sciences research on a wider scale (Chamberlayne, Bornat, & Wengraf, 2000), which has come about as a result of a recognition that much of the social constructionist type of research has departed too much from "lived realities" (Chamberlayne, Bornat, & Wengraf, 2000, p. 1). "By the 1990s, ... biographical approaches had become widely accepted, even sought out, by policy makers as 'useful'" (Chamberlayne, Bornat, & Wengraf, 2000, p. 2). In recognition of their usefulness, accounts of learning experience have been used in various empowering contexts such as organizational management and training (Abma, 2003; Musson, 2004), adult education (Dominice, 2000), computer education for children (Papert, 1993), assessment in early childhood settings (Carr, 2001), helping people with learning difficulties (Gray & Ridden, 1999) and education of minority groups (Lee, 2001).

The Language Education in China project

In my project entitled 'Language education in China', accounts of learning experience were also found useful, at least as a complement to other data. The main purpose in the project was to consider learners' actual language learning experience against the prevailing language policy changes in the People's Republic of China since 1949. The research tools in the study were document analysis, surveys and interviews; 475 learners participated in the surveys and 52 in the interviews. Interviews of the 52 learners were conducted in Putonghua, the standard Chinese dialect (see Appendix); topics covered include: the learners' biographical details, the languages they had learnt, how the languages were learnt (in the family, at school, from others or on their own), what helped or hindered their learning, the time they spent on various learning activities and what the school or the government could do to facilitate their learning. The interviews were then transcribed and excerpts were translated into English and presented as first-person accounts. The choice of excerpts was based on the principle of

providing as complete a language learning profile of the learner as possible; repetitions, similar examples or details not focused on language learning were not included. This paper only presents four learners' accounts from this data pool to illustrate how such accounts of learning experience can be used to gain insights about language education on aspects such as changes in language policy over time, teacher and classroom factors and more individual learning circumstances (for other aspects of the study, see Lam, in press). Before the learners' accounts are presented, it is useful to first provide a brief review of language policy in China as background to the accounts.

Language policy in China

China is a multilingual and multidialectal country. For the majority language group, the Han Chinese, there are two main groups of dialects: the northern dialects and the southern dialects. The northern dialects can be subdivided into seven sub-groups and the southern dialects into six sub-groups (Huang, 1987, pp. 33-45). In addition, among the 55 ethnic minorities, over 80 languages are used (State Language Commission, 1995, p. 159). The official language in China is Chinese. The standard Chinese dialect, Putonghua, maps well onto the written form of modern Chinese. Various foreign languages have been taught in China at different times. In the 1950s, Russian was of primary importance. Thereafter, English has been taught as the most important foreign language. Other foreign languages of secondary importance in China include Japanese, German, French and other languages used for diplomatic purposes. Since its establishment, the People's Republic has implemented three main language policies:

1. The standardization of Chinese
2. The propagation of English
3. The development of minority languages

The standardization of Chinese

The standardization of Chinese involved codification of the script and the pronunciation. In 1954, discussion on the simplification of the script was initiated. This was motivated by the hope that simplified characters would help to improve literacy rates. In 1956, the First Character Simplification Scheme was announced. It was confirmed in 1964 and reaffirmed in 1986. 1956 also saw the directive that all schools for Han Chinese should teach in Putonghua. Workshops to train teachers were organized. To facilitate the learning of a standard pronunciation based on Putonghua, a phonetic alphabet, *hanyu pinyin*, was publicized in 1958 (for details of these changes, see State Language Commission, 1996). Although Chinese dialects share one writing script, they can be quite different in pronunciation, word order for some phrases, particles and vocabulary. The northern dialect groups share more similarity in pronunciation though differences in tone and vocabulary still exist while the southern dialect groups are more dissimilar from each other. Since the standard dialect, Putonghua, is a northern dialect, native speakers of the southern dialects have the greater learning task when developing their competence in Putonghua (Lam, 2002a).

The propagation of English

When the People's Republic was established, Russian was the most important foreign language for a short period. English was accorded importance in China soon after relations with the Soviet Union became tense in the mid 1950s. As early as 1957, a draft syllabus for teaching English in junior secondary school was distributed. In 1961, the syllabus for English majors at university and college level was defined. 1960 to 1965 saw the establishment of some foreign language schools in China. This development would have gone unabated if not for the Cultural Revolution which was a period of political and social turbulence in China occurring from 1966 to 1976. Even during the Cultural Revolution, in 1971, China replaced Taiwan in the United Nations, and in 1972, Richard Nixon's visit to China cleared the way for exchange between China and the United States of America. After the Cultural Revolution was over and university admission resumed in 1978, more attention was paid to English for non-English majors and English in schools. With Deng Xiaoping's Policy of Four Modernizations (or plans to modernize agriculture, industry, science and technology, and the military in China) announced in the same year, the prominence of English escalated and it has not abated since (Lam, 2002b).

The development of minority languages

The total minority population of 106,430,000 constitutes only about 8.4% of the total population in China (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2001) but they live in a widespread area of about 64% of the total area of China (Dai et. al., 1997, p. 10). Literacy plans for the minorities, also referred to as nationalities, are therefore not easy to implement. Before 1949, 20 of the 55 minorities already had a written form for their languages. From the 1950s up till the 1980s, new orthographies were developed or modified for some ethnic groups. The minorities have been encouraged to become bilingual in their own language as well as Putonghua (State Language Commission, 1996, p. 37). For minority groups small in numbers, educational or economic advancement may be possible only if they become proficient in Chinese (Lam, 2004). Except during the Cultural Revolution when all scholarly activities were repudiated, by and large, the three policies have been consistently implemented throughout the last 50 years. In spite of the prevailing policy directions, learners educated in different time periods and in different locations would have had different experiences. (This section is based on Lam, 2002c.)

The learning experience of four learners

The policy trends as presented in the previous section were tracked through an analysis of official policy statements and other sources. Surveys as well as interviews were used to compare the reality of learner experience with the policy trends. I now present four learners' experiences from the majority language group, the Han Chinese: two on learning Chinese (Yan and Danny) and two on learning English (Xue and Hua). Only pseudonyms are used. The interviewee's age cited

was that in 2000. A sub-title for each paragraph in each account has been added to guide the reader. The four learners are:

1. *Yan* (male, aged 44, a political scientist)
2. *Danny* (male, aged 28, a hotel employee)
3. *Xue* (female, aged 44, an English teacher)
4. *Hua* (female, aged 25, a Chinese teacher)

Yan (Han Chinese Interviewee 12, male, aged 44, a political scientist)

Background. I was born in 1956 near Changan [now Xian]. I started going to school in 1962. In those days, because of the Cultural Revolution, school was irregular. In 1970, I went to a senior secondary school away from home. In 1973, I returned to my village as a *zhi1 qing1* [intellectual youth]. I worked as a farmer. From 1975 to 1977, I studied at a Teachers' College in Xian. After that, I taught politics for half a year in a secondary school. In 1978, the universities resumed admission and I came to this university [in the northern interior]. Upon graduation in 1982, I started teaching political science here.

The Xian dialect. I spoke the Xian dialect from birth because it was spoken around me. I was educated in the Xian dialect even during my junior secondary schooldays. Even in senior secondary school, not every teacher taught in Putonghua. My Chinese teacher even pronounced my name wrongly in Putonghua. He was a good teacher though.

Putonghua at Teachers' College. It was only during my Teachers' College days that I had a teacher who emphasized the standardization of the Chinese language. He was a member of the National Script Reform Committee. He prepared materials on the differences between Putonghua and the Xian dialect and requested that we should use Putonghua in class and when conversing. There was also another teacher who left a deep impression on me. She was from the south of Shaanxi. There were some characters she could not pronounce in the standard way. She was always asking the other teacher how to pronounce some characters correctly. These two teachers made a big impact on me. I became willing to speak and to learn Putonghua.

Other Chinese dialects. Time and again, I visited other cities like Liaoning, Beijing, Wuhan and Chengdu to attend short courses or conferences. I can understand several Chinese dialects because of my contact with speakers of different dialects, especially during my visits to other cities. During my visits, it was natural to speak Putonghua. In Liaoning, for example, for half-a-year as a Visiting Scholar, I only spoke Putonghua.

Danny (Han Chinese Interviewee 18, male, aged 28, a hotel employee)

Background. I was born in Gulangyu [an island off Xiamen in the southern coastal region] in 1972 and went to school and university in [a southern coastal city]. I studied management as an undergraduate. In 1993, I began working at the reception counter of a hotel. In October 1998, I came to this university [the same southern coastal city] to study English.

Minnanhua, Putonghua and respecting others. I speak Minnanhua [a Fujian

dialect] and Putonghua equally well. I learnt Minnanhua from my grandmother who took care of me. Putonghua was not used at home. When I was four, I went to kindergarten and was taught in Putonghua. Outside the classroom, my classmates and I still conversed in Minnanhua but we spoke Putonghua with the teachers. In [the same southern coastal city], we have a lot of visitors from other provinces. In a group of three or four people, if one does not speak Minnanhua, we immediately switch to Putonghua. This is a kind of respect for that person.

Cantonese. I also learnt Guangdonghua [Cantonese] from television dramas and video-tapes from Hong Kong. In the hotel where I worked, we had some visitors from Hong Kong and Macau. Some overseas customers also spoke Cantonese. Around 1994 and 1995, I met a Cantonese friend from Hong Kong who could not understand any Putonghua. Since I was interested in languages, I bought two or three Cantonese tapes and spent two or three weeks listening to the tapes 'with all my life' [with total dedication]. I wanted to communicate with him. Besides, in my industry, knowing one more language is very advantageous. In 1997, when I went to a world tourism exhibition in Hong Kong, I could shop in Cantonese.

Xue (Han Chinese Interviewee 30, female, aged 44, an English teacher)

Background. I was born in 1956 in a city in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region near Yinchuan. From birth, I was speaking the local dialect at home but from primary school, the teacher was speaking Putonghua. I went to primary school in 1962 and secondary school in 1973. From 1973 to 1975, I was 'sent to the village'; I taught in 3 or 4 village schools simultaneously. From 1975 to 1978, I came here [a university in the northern interior] to study English as my major. I stayed to teach in the Foreign Languages Department. In 1990, I was sent to England for my Masters. I returned in 1991.

Late start. I learned English in the classroom formally and rather late. In secondary school, what I learned was Russian but I have forgotten all of it. From university at 19, I started learning English, every day in the classroom. In those days, the 1970s, conditions were not good. There were no learning materials. There was nothing. The tape recorder was the largest [in size as compared to modern tape recorders]. Fifteen people shared one recorder. We looked at the reel turning. The teaching materials were written by Chinese people. We practised sentence structures, memorized them, memorized grammar, memorized the reading passages. No books to read. At last, my teacher lent me a book, *English 900*. I treated that like a rare treasure. Every day, I memorized those 900 sentences almost until I graduated in 1978.

Economic reforms and books. Then the economic reforms came and books also came in around that time. After that, I came across materials like *Essential English*. The earliest materials from overseas that I came across were *Linguaphone* materials. Both sets of materials were from England. After that, it was *English For Today*, American materials.

First foreign teachers. In 1979, the first batch of foreign teachers (*wai⁴ jiao¹*) came to our university—two Americans. They came to teach the teachers. I was the youngest teacher then. The old professors with white hair all went to that

class. Every day, we had class. I felt that was the time when my English, especially my listening and speaking, improved especially quickly. The foreign teachers stayed for two years. I studied under them all that while. Before that, I had not seen foreigners; I had not listened to them; I had not spoken to them.

Short courses at Xian. Then I was sent to Xian for further training. The British organized those short courses. They just started then—in 1982. I was there from February to July for half a year. I felt I learned a lot. In the morning, we had lessons. In the afternoon, we sang English songs. My English improved quite fast. In 1986, I was sent to Xian again. This time, I taught listening, extensive reading, intensive reading and I learned on my own.

Sino-British exchange. In 1989, there was a joint project between the Chinese and the British. Two British teachers came every year and they recruited two Chinese teachers to be sent to England as their counterparts. The project was to organize training in applied linguistics for young teachers from the northern interior. All over the country, there were 20 odd such projects. The 5-year project was called the Advanced Teacher Training Course. I worked with the British for a year. Then I was sent to England. In England, I stayed in a house with a Malaysian, a South American... We could only communicate in English. After a year, I returned to work with the British again. Because the British did half the teaching and I did half, there was much to discuss. I had to write the reports on our project. So my English improved.

Hua (Han Chinese Interviewee 29, female, aged 25, a Chinese teacher)

Background. Born in 1975, I grew up in a city in Guangxi. From 1992 to 1996, I went to university in Nanning. In 1996, I moved to Lanzhou to do graduate studies. I now teach in the Chinese department here [a university in the northern interior]. I spoke the Guilin dialect from birth at home but because our home was in a factory compound and there were many workers from other provinces, I started speaking Putonghua from very young.

English in schooldays. I started learning English in class from Secondary 1. (I also studied Japanese for a year in graduate school.) Teachers of English varied in how much English they used in class. Some, especially the university graduates, used English for the full lesson. Others, like those in Secondary 1, could not teach in English. When I was in Secondary 1, conditions for exposure to English were not very good. The opportunities I had came from cassette tapes from my family. I remember too that on CCTV Channel 4 [a government channel], there were some news and travel programmes in English. I watched them often but did not understand much.

Campus radio. Before university, I did not focus on improving listening; the university entrance examination did not test listening. After I entered university, the Band 4 and Band 6 examinations [national examinations] would test listening. So in class, teachers would let us listen to some tapes. I bought some tapes too. The university also prepared some campus radio programmes in English. Each of us had a radio; it was not too expensive, about 40 *yuan*. When we entered university, it was compulsory for us to buy it. We needed it for the Band 4, Band 6 examinations. I remember going to school in the morning—everyone was

wearing earphones listening. At night around 8 or 9 pm, there was also a programme.

English Corner, movies and books. In university, there was more variety in the learning mode. We could go to the English Corner on Friday night. We could also see foreign movies quite often on campus. I also chose a course, 'English movie appreciation'. The sub-titles were painted over to see how much you could understand. In comparison with secondary school, there were more reading materials.

Examinations. At university, I studied English for two years. After that, I was still learning by myself because I wanted to pass Band 6, not just Band 4. I passed Band 6 in my third year. It seems that we learn English to pass examinations. In secondary school, it is to pass the university entrance examination. At university, it is to pass Band 4/Band 6. As a graduate student, it is to meet the graduate studies requirement. Since learning English is mainly for passing examinations, we do not read much. Near examinations, we do a lot of exercises.

Motivated to learn. In secondary school, I was not very aware of how I learned English. At university, the English material I was exposed to enabled me to become more aware of my learning. The only time I really felt I wanted to learn English was when I was a graduate student; the pressure from learning English was not so great then. I had already passed Band 6. So the graduate English examination was easier. Around me, many classmates had very good English. Many of them wanted to go overseas and had to prepare for the TOEFL [Test of English as a Foreign Language] and the GRE [Graduate Record Examination]. So their English was very good. I felt I should also try harder. When I first went to university, I tried going to the English Corner but I was too shy. I cared very much about whether people would laugh at me. When the person I was speaking to tried to speak, she too was very nervous. So after going twice, I stopped. But as a graduate student, I felt I should go to the English Corner because it was meaningless to learn English if I could not speak or understand it. So I went and I spoke.

Discussion

The four learning sketches presented offer insights about language education in China, on aspects such as changes in language policy over time and more micro aspects of learning.

At the policy level, the accounts of their learning illustrate the changes in policy that have occurred. At the time when the two older learners, Yan and Xue, were going to school, the twin policies of propagation of Putonghua and of switching from Russian to English were being implemented. Yan was educated in the local dialect in his junior secondary schooldays. Even when he was in senior secondary school, not every teacher taught in Putonghua. Similarly, Xue did not experience good conditions for learning English. She first learnt Russian at school. Only when Xue was at university did she begin to learn English. In contrast, the younger learners, Danny and Hua, experienced better conditions for acquiring Putonghua and English respectively. Danny was taught in Putonghua from kindergarten. Hua started learning English from Secondary 1. While Xue

had hardly any books when she began learning English, Hua had access to campus radio, movies and books.

Their learning experiences also show some changes in attitude. Yan was not too willing to speak Putonghua in his early years and was not very impressed with the Putonghua competence of some of his teachers but was influenced positively later by his teachers' readiness to use Putonghua in spite of their less than perfect pronunciation. For the younger Danny, although he could speak a few dialects, he would immediately switch to Putonghua if someone in his company could not speak his local dialect, citing as his reason "a kind of respect for that person". This shows that Putonghua has become the accepted dialect for communication among different dialect groups in China. Xue's experience and Hua's taken together also illustrate the increasing role played by English. In Xue's days, going abroad to study was only for the chosen few. Most had not even seen a foreigner. But by Hua's university days, studying overseas had become a possible dream for more learners as long as they could achieve the grades required and survive the associated examination culture.

The four accounts of learners' experience also provide insights about what facilitates learning from the learner's point of view. Yan was motivated by a teacher who was willing to work hard to improve herself. He also benefited from a clear school policy set by another teacher—that they "should use Putonghua in class and when conversing". In addition, his job took him to several cities, which required him to have contact with people from other dialect groups, making it necessary and "natural" for him to speak Putonghua with them. Danny's job as a hotel employee, however, required him to have a working knowledge of Cantonese in addition to Putonghua and so he tried to learn it. That Xue could succeed in learning English so well as an adult probably stemmed in no small measure from her being ready to work hard, even though, at one time, she only had access to memorizing tasks and no other resources. She also cited how much she improved from participating in intensive courses and working with foreigners in a joint project on a day-to-day basis. Hua had very good technical support in terms of tapes, television, radio programmes and so on. In addition, she also had positive peer influence. She pointed out that her classmates around her had very good English and she forced herself to overcome her shyness and go to the English Corner "because it was meaningless to learn English" if she could not speak or understand it.

Brief as these excerpts are, they serve to illustrate that accounts of learners' experience can provide insights about the larger societal context of language education as well as more micro aspects of learners' learning circumstances.

How accounts of learners' experience can be used in education

Accounts of learners' experience can be used at several levels. Policy makers can use them to track the implementation of policy changes over time, if cross-sectional data is collected from a range of age groups. Teacher trainers or teachers can use such accounts to gain insights on how students learn and then adjust their teacher training programme or classroom teaching accordingly. Learners

can also become more aware of their own learning needs if they are asked to articulate their own learning histories because in narrating their learning experience, they become more aware of their own learning.

Collecting such information is not too difficult. Learners can be interviewed or can be guided to write their own learning narratives with questions about the following areas (see Appendix):

1. Their biographical details
2. The languages they have learnt
3. How the languages were learnt: in the family, at school, from others, on their own
4. What helped or hindered their learning
5. The time they spent on various learning activities
6. What the school or the government can do to facilitate learning

The number of accounts of learning experience to be collected varies with the purpose of the investigation. If a teacher is trying to help a student experiencing learning problems, the teacher needs to interview only that learner, perhaps on more than one occasion, to keep track of his/her learning over a period of time. If a number of teachers wish to find out how the language curriculum is being experienced at different levels, then a cross-sectional study involving 20 or 30 learners in total is more appropriate. Collecting more than 30 accounts is usually not necessary and the content may become repetitive. For purposes that go beyond the individual learner, if resources permit, it is probably appropriate to situate the learners' accounts collected in the context of other data gathered using methods such as class observations, surveys of learners' language use or interviews of teachers.

If a number of learning accounts are being collected in a class just as a learning activity in itself, sharing them also enables learners to share learning techniques with each other. Rapport between students and teachers or among students is also likely to be enhanced as a result of such sharing.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have reviewed very briefly the increasing emphasis on the learner in language education both in pedagogy and in the use of accounts of learners' experience as a research tool. I have also tried to illustrate how such accounts can be collected, what kind of accounts may emerge and what insights we may gain from such accounts with reference to four learners from China. Such accounts can be interpreted at the national policy level, the classroom pedagogical level and the individual developmental level. Any teacher is capable of conducting such research. It is a tool at once simple to use and empowering to adopt.

Acknowledgements

This paper was first presented at the Inaugural CELC (Centre for English Language Communication) International Symposium, 3 to 4 June 2004, in Singapore. It is based on part of the findings from a project fully supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China, Project No. HKU 7175/98H. I am indebted to Kathy Chow, my assistant, all my interviewees and helpers in China and my university for every support.

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Appendix: Interview questions

I. Background

1. Respondent's Project ID No.: _____
2. Respondent's name: _____ Place of birth: _____
3. Age: _____ Sex: _____ Occupation: _____
4. Date: _____ Time: _____ Place of interview: _____

II. Interview probes for interviewees who are adults (to be adapted for younger learners)

1. Can you give me some background about yourself? It would help me to understand your language learning experience better. When and where were you born? At what age did you go to school: pre-school, primary, secondary, university? When and where did you start working, change jobs ...?
2. What language(s) do you know/speak? Which ones do you know/speak best?
3. How did you learn each of the languages you know? From family members? (What languages did/do they speak?) At school? From using it with other people? By yourself?
4. What helped or hindered you in your learning? Any particular incidents you can remember? Was your learning of a new language or dialect affected by:
 - a. The language(s) or dialect(s) you already knew? Your previous learning experience?
 - b. Your personality? How you felt about the language?
 - c. How you felt about other learners?

- d. What you thought of your teacher? What he/she did/did not do?
 - e. The language circumstances/policies in the community/country? The media?
5. Can you remember how much time you spent learning Putonghua/Chinese and learning English? Different at different levels? Can you remember some of the activities in class or the titles of the books you used?
 6. What would you like your school/university/government to do to help you learn the language(s) you know better?