Effects of Group Work on English Communicative Competence of Chinese International Graduates in United States Institutions of Higher Education

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Abstract

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Keywords

Group Work, Communicative Competence, Grammatical Competence, Sociolinguistic Competence, Strategic Competence

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In the past three decades, with the increasing development of China and frequent international communications, more and more Chinese students have come to Western countries such as America, Canada, Britain, and Australia to pursue higher education degrees. According to the Chinese embassy in America (2003), more than 580,000 Chinese students have gone abroad to pursue advanced studies since the Chinese politician and diplomat, Xiaoping Deng, implemented the reform and open-up policy in 1978. Among the international students who attend U.S. universities and colleges, Chinese students constitute one of the largest international student bodies (Institute of International Education, 2011; Orleans, 1988; Wan, 2001). In the academic year 2010-2011, 157,558 students from China enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education, an increase of 23 percent from the previous year (Institute of International Education, 2011). According to the Chronicle of Higher Education (2012), Chinese students have typically been concentrated in the pursuit of graduate degrees. Even though they have studied English as a second language (L2) for many years in China and performed well in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Graduate Record Examination (GRE), or International English Language Testing System (IELTS), they are generally supposed to and have been found to encounter various difficulties and lack confidence when expressing themselves to native speakers (NSs) of English (Orleans, 1988; Rao, 1976; Taylor, 1987). The deficiency in English affects international students' academic performance and impacts their ability to socially interact with others (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

As one of the most influential foreign student groups on American campuses, Chinese students are bound to encounter great challenges and difficulties in adapting to American pedagogical culture due to the great differences in pedagogical culture and expectations between the two nations (Perkins, 1977; Yan & Berliner, 2011). In China, the class is usually didactic and teacher-centered with fewer interactions, and independent thinking and learning have always been stressed. By contrast, one distinguishing characteristic of U.S. education is that group work, one type of cooperative learning, has been widely used. Thus, problems might occur when Chinese students experience or adjust to a new pedagogical culture (Sawir, 2005). Under the interaction of two different pedagogical traditions, how do Chinese students

with limited English proficiency perceive group work, what challenges have they faced when cooperating with native group members, and how do they cope with these challenges and adapt themselves to group work? The present study attempts to investigate Chinese graduate students' lived experiences with group work and the effects of group work on their English communicative competence by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of Chinese graduate students with group work?
2. How did group work influence Chinese graduate students' English communicative competence in terms of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence respectively?

Literature Review

Definition of Communicative Competence

Since the concept of communicative competence is fundamental to this study, it is necessary to briefly summarize the term. In 1965, Chomsky, the generative linguist, first distinguished the term "competence" from "performance". He proposed that competence indicates the internalized linguistics and grammatical knowledge of the language user, but has nothing to do with the actual use of language in concrete situations, whereas performance means the practical usage of language in a specific social context. Disagreeing with Chomsky's exclusion of the socio-cultural features of language from his definition of competence, Hymes (1972) coined the term "communicative competence" that refers to a language user's grammatical and social knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately. He stated that communicative competence consists of four types of abilities:

1. Whether (and to what degree) something is formally *possible*;
2. Whether (and to what degree) something is *feasible* in virtue of the means of implementation available;
3. Whether (and to what degree) something is *appropriate* (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;
4. Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually *performed*, and what its doing entails (Hymes, 1972, p. 281).

Afterwards, many scholars did research on communicative competence and provided various definitions and classifications. Canale and Swain (1980) redefined communicative competence as consisting of three components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Grammatical competence can "be understood to include knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammatical semantics, and phonology" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 29). Sociolinguistic competence consists of two sets of rules: sociocultural rules and rules of discourse (Canale & Swain, 1980). Sociocultural rules specify the ways in which speakers' utterances are produced and understood appropriately in a specific sociocultural context, and rules of discourse are about "the extent to which appropriate attitude and register or style are conveyed by a particular grammatical form within a given sociocultural context" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 30). Strategic competence is "made up of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 30). Canale and Swain's model of communicative competence have great influence on L2 teaching and learning. In 1990, Bachman put forward the concept "communicative language ability" that

"can be described as consisting of both knowledge, or competence, and the capacity for implementing, or executing that competence in appropriate, contextualized communicative language use" (p. 84) and includes three components: language competence, strategic competence, and psychophysiological mechanisms. Up to now, many studies have addressed the development of students' communicative competence (e.g., Gilmore, 2011; Greenewald, 1980; Helt, 1982; Zha, Kelly, Park, & Fitzgerald, 2006).

This study is rooted in Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence.

Group Work

Group work as a form of cooperative learning means that several people work together to finish a certain task or achieve a certain learning goal (Adams & Hamm, 1990; Bormann & Bormann, 1976). It has been applied into classrooms in various formats: evidence-based learning, problem-based learning, snowballing, buzz groups, jigsaw, and the group investigation method, etc. (Edmunds & Brown, 2010; Williams, 2011). Previous literature suggests that group work could arouse students' learning interests, cultivate their exploring ability and creative thinking (Davidson & Worsham, 1992; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Johnston & Miles, 2004) and improve their team spirit and social communication skills (Fearon, McLaughlin, & Eng, 2012; Olivera & Strauss, 2004). Over the past several decades, it has emerged as an important instructional practice in the field of L2 education. Many researchers have claimed that group work is beneficial to L2 learners by offering many and diverse opportunities of interacting directly with the target language (e.g., Doughty & Pica, 1984; Long, Adams, McLean, & Castafios, 1976; Pica & Doughty, 1985; Taylor, 1987). Long and Porter (1985) claimed that students engage in more negotiations for meaning in the small group than in teacher-centered, whole-class settings. This study indicates that group work improves the quality of student talk by increasing language practice opportunities. A study by Bejarano (1987) further supports the positive effects of small group cooperative methods on students' English as foreign language (EFL) learning. After comparing 665 seventh-grade students' academic achievement in English between the group work methods and the whole-class method, he concluded that students in small groups make significantly greater improvement than those using the whole-class method on the test and on the listening comprehension scale. These findings suggest that the communicative approach involved in group work facilitates second language learning. In addition, Sugino (1994) conducted a study with six Japanese learners of English and found that group work enhances their language use. The results show that students would produce more word and communication units in content-focused task than in form-focused task.

Many researchers have addressed Asian students' attitudes towards or behaviors in group work and the results vary. Through interviews, Li and Campbell (2008) found that Asian students show positive attitudes towards group discussions where they could interact with students from diverse cultural background, improve their English language skills, and promote their cultural understanding. They also found that Asian students hold intensely negative views about group assignments. Wong (2004) further noted that Asian students prefer to work individually so that they can manage their own time and "have full control of the final product' (p. 162). However, Tiong and Yong's (2004) quantitative study suggests that Asian students prefer doing group work and learning collaboratively in an informal learning environment, but they have low participations in group discussions in the classroom among peers and teachers. Then, using structural equation modeling, Fushino (2010) conducted a study with 729 first-year university students in Japan and found that beliefs about

L2 group work influenced students' willingness to communicate in L2 group work via communication confidence.

Researchers have attributed Asian students' lack of interest in participating in group work to their inadequate language skills, the influence of their prior learning experiences, pedagogical differences, and their underdeveloped interpersonal communication skills (Holmes, 2004).

Although a growing body of literature has investigated the effects of group work on L2 learning, the majority of the research deals with this issue in experimental settings or L2 classes where all group members are L2 learners sharing the same socio-cultural background. However, for Chinese graduate students in U.S. institutions, they participate in a group in which nearly all of the other group members have grown up in a totally different culture and are NSs of English. Besides, due to China's national condition and educational system, group work has not been widely applied to L2 classes and the instruction of other disciplines. As a result, most Chinese graduate students seem a little unfamiliar with this type of cooperative learning mode. In this case, how do they perceive themselves and group work when confronting cultural and pedagogical differences? This population needs attention from educational researchers. However, review of previous literature shows that little is known about the perceptions of Chinese international graduates as they engage in group work as well as the effects of group work on their English communicative competence in an authentic L2 context. This study intends to enrich the available resources addressing this issue. Since the participants are from different disciplines, group work to be studied includes group discussion or group project both in and out of class and consists of only several people. The focus of this study is to examine students' lived experiences in English communications with native speakers during group work.

Methodology

My Role as the Researcher

As a Chinese international graduate student coming from a pedagogical culture which has advocated the teacher-centered approach, I have studied in one public U.S. university where this study was conducted for more than 3 years. Over these years, I have encountered some difficulties and confusions in my study due to the differences between the two educational traditions and my limited English communicative proficiency. I also went through the process of pedagogical cultural adaption.

Since I had similar educational backgrounds and overseas learning experiences with the participants, I took the role of an insider researcher. The commonalities between us afforded me access into this cultural group. I can get a deep understanding of their ways of thinking and meanings of behaviors and have an established intimacy with them which "promotes both the telling and the judging of truth" (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002, p. 9). Nevertheless, the insider role would bring my subjective biases into the data analysis and interpretation process, so I conducted member checking and peer debriefing to challenge my positionality.

Method

A qualitative phenomenological approach (Husserl, 1931) was employed to gain an in-depth insight into Chinese international graduate students' lived experiences with group work in a real L2 context and the effects of group work on their English communicative competence from their perspective. Phenomenology is a method which "aims to get 'to the

things themselves' through creating written descriptions of personal experience as the source of all claims to knowledge" (Conklin, 2007, p. 276). According to Moustakas (1994), it requires the researcher to cut through his or her taken-for-granted assumptions, look at things openly, and make sense of the meanings by allowing his or her consciousness to interact with the things.

The Site

This study was carried out at a large, research-intensive public university in the Southeast of the United States. The enrollment of international students and recruitment of international faculty indicates its efforts to diversify the campus culture and promote cross-cultural communications and interactions. At this university, the number of international students who come from about 90 countries occupies 5 percent of the total number of students. On the front wall of the international service center building, ten flags have been displayed, representing the top ten countries in terms of the number of international students. Among them, China ranks first, and India as the second. The purpose of displaying flags is to welcome international students to further their study in America.

The Participants

Fourteen Chinese graduate students in the disciplines of English, communication, education, business, human science, and computer science were selected to participate in this study through purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). The criteria for sample selection included: Chinese students who were non-native speakers (NNSs) of English, got bachelor degrees from Chinese institutions of higher education, and had studied for master or doctoral degrees at this university for more than one year. Among the participants, eight were females and six were males; nine were pursuing doctoral degrees, and five were pursuing master degrees. Their ages ranged from 24 to 38, with the mean age of being 27. The length of their stay in the U.S. ranged from one year to three years.

Data Collection

The study had been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of my institution prior to implementation. Data were collected through interviews. Before the interviews, the purpose and research design of this study, and the guarantee of their privacy and data confidentiality were explained to the participants. After they agreed to participate in this study, IRB consent forms were signed between both parties.

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants individually in a private setting, such as the participants' apartment or personal office, or in a public place such as the library. Each interview lasted for approximately 40 minutes. A semi-structured interview protocol was drafted in advance so that I could pose emerging questions based on participants' responses, facial expressions, and behaviors, and the participants could have a chance to provide a lot of useful information and immerse themselves in a normal conversation. Based on Canale and Swain's (1980) model, questions focused around how Chinese graduate students perceived group work and the effects of group work on their English communicate competence in terms of three aspects: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. All the participants were allowed to speak Mandarin in the interview so that they could express themselves fully, deeply, and clearly. Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim by me. In order to conduct an ethical and participatory research, during the interviews, I tried to keep reflexive

on my insider researcher role, value orientation, and language expression. I tried to avoid using emotional and judging words. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the participants' remarks which were quoted in this paper were translated to Standard English carefully by me. I approved to be fluent in both English and Chinese. Another professional researcher who was bilingual in Chinese and English was invited to review my translations. Disagreement was negotiated until final complete agreement. All the data were kept confidential, and all identifying data were removed from the results.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Date analysis was conducted in several steps. First, I read through all the Chinese transcripts and got a feel for what was being said. Second, I read them carefully a few times, identified key categories and themes, and wrote down my initial reflections. Then, to challenge my positionality as an insider researcher and enhance the validity of this research (Creswell, 1998), peer debriefing was utilized. Peer debriefing is "a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical sessions and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). I invited a professional researcher who was bilingual in Chinese and English to review those Chinese transcripts, emerging categories and themes coded by me, and my reflections. Disagreement was solved through further negotiations. Finally, the professional researcher was given access to the final report to detect whether I involved my subjective biases in data interpretation, over-emphasized a point, or missed something important. As for different opinions, we discussed several times until reaching an agreement. Researchers have suggested that the process of peer debriefing enhances the trustworthiness and credibility of qualitative research (e.g., Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1996).

Member checking (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) was also conducted either during the interviews or after the study was completed. I shared data, findings, or interpretation with some participants for verification and confirmation, aiming to minimize my predominant voice and strengthen the validity and authenticity of this study.

Results

Changes in Behaviors and Attitudes towards Group Work

The data showed that these participants' attitudes towards group work went through changes from initial inadaptation or dislike to later adaptation or acceptance, and the time for their adjustment ranged from half a year to one year. Their initial inadaptation was largely due to two reasons: limited English proficiency in speaking and listening, and pedagogical differences between the U.S. and China.

Nearly all the participants reported that their "insufficient English speaking and listening ability" was a main impediment to their active participations in group work. Language barriers directly resulted in their little speaking or passive participations in activities such as group discussions, presentations, or project writing tasks. One participant in communication recalled her inner conflicts upon arrival:

> I was unused to group work at that time because of my poor oral English. I had
> difficulties in English expression. I couldn't express myself fluently in English.
> … Sometimes I really felt embarrassed and guilty because I couldn't make
> contributions to my group.

Limited speaking ability kept her from communicating effectively with NSs and made her frustrated and unsatisfied with her performance in the presence of group members. One male participant in business shared similar experiences:

> It was really a hard time for me. You know, they spoke English so fast, and I couldn't follow and keep up with their pace. I spoke very slowly, so I rarely spoke.

His low participation in group discussion manifested a lack of confidence in English. Several other participants also said that they were "unwilling to open their mouths" to discuss with group members because of their inferior English oral skills.

Besides speaking, limited listening proficiency played a negative impact on many participants' engagement in group work, as one participant who had been in the U.S. for more than two years complained,

> You know, Americans had different accents. In the beginning, I couldn't understand what they were talking about, particularly when I was not familiar with the learning contents. So I couldn't respond to them. … This made me crazy.

The reason for his difficulties in understanding diverse accents and intonations was raised by another female participant majoring in education. She said,

> In China, we practiced listening using Standard English materials. But after I came here, I had to adapt to different accents. … I did try my best, but I still had difficulties in understanding what my group members said.

These participants' perceptions of their English communicative competence and their performances in group work upon entry into the graduate program reflected the shortcomings of China's EFL instruction which focused on reading and writing, while almost totally ignoring listening and speaking. It is not only China that has shortcomings in language instruction. Many researchers reported international students' difficulties in communicating orally in English-speaking countries (Liu, 2011; Trice, 2004).

In addition, pedagogical differences between the two educational systems served as another factor for these participants' initial dislike of group work. According to the participants, the teacher-centered approach employed in China provided them with few opportunities for discussion. Thus, when being exposed to group work, they encountered constraints resulting from their previous learning experiences in China. For instance, one female participant in business told,

> Frankly speaking, I didn't like group discussion at the beginning stage. I didn't know why to use it. In China, you know, the teacher taught, and we only listened. We needn't say anything. … I was not interested in others' ideas. I was interested in the instructor's lecture.

Her inclination to listen and disinterest in meaning negotiations reflected pedagogical cultural shock that she was undergoing. Another participant also commented,

> Sometimes, I really thought it [group work] was a waste of time. … I thought the professor could give lecture to us.

His words reflected his unfamiliarity with group work and its functions. Several other participants also held similar attitudes towards group work. Their preference for lecture suggested that independency rather than cooperation had been appreciated in Chinese education. Their responses indicated that having rarely experienced other teaching methods, they tended to take it for granted that teacher-centered approach is the only way of learning. When placed in cooperative learning environment, they could not adapt themselves to group work immediately. Cultural transfer occurred when they understood group work based on their past experiences or still within their original cultural framework.

However, after half a year to one year, these participants' behaviors and attitudes towards group work changed a lot. They took a proactive role in group work activities by starting a conversation, eliciting information, and offering feedback to group members. They even would like to lead the whole group to finish assignments or tasks. They became aware of the purposes and advantages of group work and found that they had benefited significantly from it in a number of ways, such as development of collaborative spirit and team skills, making friends, broadening and deepening expertise knowledge, as well as improvement of English communicative competence, etc. All these indicated that their adjustment to the U.S. pedagogical culture. Since this study mainly intended to investigate the ways in which group work improved Chinese graduates' English communicative competence, the other benefits were not addressed here.

Effects of Group Work on Grammatical Competence

Sufficient grammatical knowledge and competence serves as an essential basis for EFL learners' clear and accurate expression and transfer of their opinions and intentions. In this study, only two participants reported not benefiting much from group work in improving their grammatical accuracy owing to their attention to the projects. The remaining participants acknowledged that group work ameliorated their grammatical competence across various grammatical features including pronunciation, vocabulary usage, and sentence structure by exposing them to real language resources and providing a variety of opportunities to practice English with NNs in a natural way.

In some cases, Chinese students' incorrect pronunciations were not recognized at once by NSs of English. However, based on the language context, native group members could guess the exact words Chinese students wanted to speak and then provided the correct pronunciations. Group members' corrections strongly reinforced these participants' memory. As one participant in educational psychology remarked,

> Once I said a word, but I couldn't remember it now. They didn't understand me. But one lady from Singapore speculated the word and uttered it for me. Others understood. Through comparison, I realized the problems of my pronunciation.

With the help of group members, the participants noticed the pronunciation gap between them and native speakers. Afterwards, they consciously refined their own by imitating native group members' pronunciations, intonations, or stress patterns.

Besides, all the participants mentioned their improvement in vocabulary usage. Through collaborative learning tasks and group discussions, Chinese students noticed the differences in vocabulary usage between them and other group members with higher language competence. Some group members would directly correct their inappropriate use of words or phrases. One student majoring in English said,

> I wanted to express that I couldn't see distant things clearly. I used "shortsighted", but one group member told me that "nearsighted" was better. This gave me a deep impression.

Many participants like him reported that they learned a lot of new words, phrases, idiomatic expressions, and slangs from group members' expressions. Small group discussions also helped them "recall many words or phrases" from their vocabulary stock.

In addition to the improvement in pronunciation and vocabulary, most participants said that group work helped them refine their sentence structures no matter in speaking or writing. They acquired better ways of expressing the same message. As one participant noted,

> Sometimes after I spoke one sentence, some group members repeated it to make sure whether this was what I intended to say. I found their sentence structures were better than mine. ... I realized that I could have expressed my ideas in a better way.

This participant further spoke of her efforts to restructure and produce native-like utterances. When a group needed to cooperate to write a project, many participants usually asked group members to modify their language. One participant said,

> Since I was a Chinese, there must be some language errors in my writing. So I asked them to modify my writing. They gave me many good suggestions. … In my opinion, this was a facilitating process. It was encouraging.

Several other participants who had similar experiences told that they examined group members' writing and tried to adopt their better sentence patterns, vocabulary usage, and writing styles.

Effects of Group Work on Sociolinguistic Competence

According to the participants, besides inadequate grammatical competence, another factor affecting their language performance in group work was that they had no idea of what, when, and how they should speak to group members upon their entry. Group work consisting of social and cultural members greatly assisted them in recognizing cross-cultural differences and acquiring the norms, knowledge, and social rules of the target language culture. Their improvement in sociolinguistic competence was mainly manifested in their increasing mastery of socio-cultural knowledge and ability of using language appropriately.

The participants responded that through frequent discussions, collaborations, and observations of group members' behaviors and attitudes, they became more aware of Americans' characteristics, the topics interesting them, and their favor of praise and compliment. One female participant said: "Group work created a lot of opportunities, both inside and outside of the classroom, for me to know about Americans and their culture." She continued her story,

> Sometimes, we negotiated a group project at someone's home. … Besides the project, we usually talked a lot about other things, for example, their families and interesting stories. … It was like a party, a social work activity. I felt more relaxed to talk with them.

Group work in this way enabled her to delve deeply into Americans' family lives. Many other participants agreed that they gradually came to understand Americans' characteristics through group interactions, which played an important role in shortening the psychological distance between them and group members. For example, one participant talked about the positive influence of his familiarity with Americans on his changes in thought and action,

> At first, I didn't talk much with Americans because I didn't know how to talk with them. Also, I didn't have many opportunities to talk with them. But I had to communicate with others if we were required to finish a task together. … I found that most Americans were warmhearted and talkative. This made me relaxed. … I can talk freely with Americans now.

After realizing that most Americans were friendly, easygoing, polite, and direct, many participants like him gradually got rid of their previous prudence and shyness, and opened their hearts.

The interview results also showed that during the collaborations for a group task, Chinese students and their group members not only discussed learning contents with others, but also shared their own experiences and cultures. Group work expanded Chinese students' cultural knowledge. Some participants were deeply impressed by American Christian culture. One female participant majoring in L2 teaching told that she came to know about the culture of U.S. primary and middle schools from group discussions, for example, the janitor culture. Besides, most participants agreed that football was a popular topic in American culture, as one participant told,

> Many group members, especially males, usually talked about football games. When I expressed my opinions about it, I found they were very excited. So I tried to talk more about it. I think this could make us come close to each other.

His discussion of football games with group members indicated his intention to fit the culturally specific encounters.

Furthermore, these participants adopted speaking rules of the target language culture. For example, most participants noticed that U.S. culture had a higher frequency of compliment usage than China where modesty was advocated. One participant commented on her initial conflicts,

> When I wrote something or expressed some ideas, others usually praised me. Frankly speaking, I didn't think I wrote or speak well. So, I wasn't used to it and felt somewhat embarrassed. In China, you know, I couldn't receive praise from the teacher. So I often answered "no". … Later I realized it was inappropriate. I should say "Thank you" as Americans. … Now, I usually gave my praises to others.

Her behavioral changes demonstrated her understanding of the underlying values of showing mutual respect, good will, and encouragement towards individuals in the U.S. culture. Several other participants also mentioned similar experiences. Their initial feeling of confrontation, shyness, and suspiciousness implied that they interpreted a native English speaker's utterance along the sociolinguistic rules of their Chinese language culture. This is a normal phenomenon in the transitional period, as Lado (1961) noted that students would transfer their native culture system to the foreign culture and use the original mode in expression and understanding when they have contact with a new culture. However, their lived experiences in

group work enabled them to see their sociolinguistic mistakes and then adjust their manners of speaking accordingly. Their transition from initial doubt or refusal of others' compliment to latter active showing of their appreciation of others' performance indicated their acquisition of English sociolinguistic competence and attempt for assimilation and socialization to the target culture.

Effects of Group Work on Strategic Competence

The data revealed that group work enhanced their ability of employing appropriate communication strategies to make up for deficiencies in language knowledge and repair communication breakdowns. Despite the participants' unfamiliarity with the linguistic term of communication strategy, they used certain communication strategies to handle problems, particularly in oral communications. Through observations of group members' responses or attitudes, the development of conversations, and communication results, they realized what strategies had negative influence on the continuation and outcomes of their conversations and what strategies functioned best for smooth and successful communications with native speakers.

The results showed that the participants realized that use of reduction strategies inhibited the development of their English communicative competence. When being first exposed to the real-life language context, they faced difficulties in generating the target language and could not search appropriate forms immediately from their language repertoire. In this case, they usually used reduction strategies, such as topic avoidance, message abandonment, or use of simple words or sentence structures to replace the ones that they were unfamiliar with. However, based on their experiences, they acknowledged that use of reeducation strategies hindered the continuation of the conversations and caused others' misunderstandings. For example, one student in communication commented,

> At first, I usually avoided talking much about the issues that were difficulty for me to express. I just listened. Everything seemed good. But some group members misunderstood that I had no interest in the topic. … I also realized that how can I improve my English if I always kept silent?

His words reflected that although topic avoidance greatly prevented him from encountering more troubles in communication and saved his face in the short run, it cost him many good opportunities of practicing oral English and as a result impeded his development of communicative competence in the long run. Another participant in education had similar feelings,

> Sometimes, I tended to use very simple words or phrases to express my thoughts. Even though my group members seemed to understand me, I didn't think it was good for me. So I have consciously used some better words or more complex sentence structures. … This works.

Like these two participants, other participants took efforts to change this situation by speaking much more to keep their conversations with those NSs of English going.

On the one hand, after realizing the negative effects of reduction strategies on their improvement of communicative competence, these participants gradually decreased the usage frequency. On the other hand, their experiences confirmed the positive influence of achievement strategies such as similar expression, gestures, asking for help, repetition, time gaining, comprehension checks, and drawing pictures. The interview results showed that these

strategies could lengthen the conversation and help them further acquire grammatical and social-cultural knowledge through dynamic interactions with NSs. One participant mentioned his use of synonym,

> I think synonym is a very good method. When I can't find the best word, I use its synonym. For example, I used "excellent" to replace "distinguished" when I tried to praise one of my group members.

Use of synonyms or similar expressions helped him widen communication resources and achieve his original communication purpose. In addition, all the participants had experiences in using body language to assist their oral discussions with native group members. Their comments on body language included "direct", "convenient", "easy", "timesaving", and "effective". One participant who had been here for three years spoke of her interesting story:

> Once I wanted to say "injection", but I forgot it at that time. As I used one of my fingers to point directly to my hand, as I asked a group member: "Could you please tell me how to say this in English?" Looking at me, he smiled and answered: "injection". … I think I can remember this word forever.

In one sense, use of body language helped express her ideas successful; in another sense, the word offered by the group member further broadened her vocabulary or reinforced her memory of the word. Other participants also agreed that body languages served as an effective means of ensuring an ongoing conversation. In addition, one participant in educational psychology talked about the usefulness of drawing pictures in describing an abstract issue. She said,

> If I am unable to express something, for example, a theoretical concept, I would like to draw pictures. … My pictures are not vivid, but can show them [group members] a general framework or structure, for example, the relations among some variables. … It is very effective for me.

In this case, utilization of visual images helped her transfer her knowledge and intentions to others.

In a word, a comparison of failures and success in English communications increased their motivation to continue adopting achievement strategies whereas avoid using reduction strategies, which indicated their improvement in strategic competence. The improvement was achieved in an authentic discourse community created by group work. They developed their ability of managing the conversation.

Discussion

Findings

These participants' change of attitudes towards group work reflects the shift from the negotiation stage to the adjustment stage involved in culture shock (Pedersen, 1995). In the negotiation phrase, differences in pedagogical traditions between China and the U.S. make them encounter many unacquainted or unfavorable events that are inconsistent with their native cultural system. Since Chinese education has emphasized a teacher-centered approach, group work seems strange to these Chinese graduate students once they embark on their

studies in the U.S. academic environment. Besides, the focus on reading and writing in EFL instruction directly results in their weakness in practical communication competence. All these things cause their frustration and embarrassment, and negatively affect their ability to succeed in academics and interact with group members. The findings confirm previous literature that Chinese students' interpersonal communication skills and their previous educational experiences may disadvantage them in a pedagogical culture that rewards the assertive, communication, and cooperation (Beaver & Tuck, 1998; Holmes, 2004). After a period, they enter the adjustment phrase whereby they consciously adjust their speech acts and behavioral modes in order to socially integrate into the host culture. In this study, the participants' recognition of the positive influence of group work on their personal, academic, as well as L2 development results in their increasing initiative and efforts in adaptation to the group work culture. Fushino (2010) stated that students' willingness to communicate with group members in L2 is related to their beliefs about L2 group work.

The interview results show that group work improves Chinese graduate students' English communicative competence in terms of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence in an authentic target language learning context. The results are in line with those of previous studies (Bejarano, 1987; Long & Porter, 1985; Sugino, 1994). Both formal and informal conversations and interactions with NSs created by group work help them attain the linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge, and communication skills of the target language.

First, the primary factor affecting the acquisition of grammatical competence is the input that language learners receive. Krashen (1981) highlighted the importance of comprehensible input for L2 acquisition. Group work improves Chinese international students' English grammatical competence by offering much natural comprehensive linguistic input regarding pronunciation, lexicon, and syntax. The group work studied in a U.S. class differs from that in China's EFL instructional context. In the U.S., most of the group members are NSs, so nearly all the language knowledge that these Chinese participants could get is from NSs in a natural and genuine language and social context. When these participants negotiate with group members for a task or project, whether face-to-face or through email, e-learning, or chat room, those NSs' pronunciations, intonations, rhythm, native use of words and phrases, and sentence structures are all comprehensible and valuable input for Chinese students. These inputs differ greatly from the standardized EFL learning materials used in China and could not be obtained from those Chinese group members or EFL teachers in a China's class. Recognizing the differences in grammatical knowledge and output between them and NSs, they modify their grammatical utterances towards native.

Many sociolinguists regard socio-cultural aspects as an important external factor for language acquisition (Doughty & Long, 2003; Ellis, 1997; Hymes, 1972; Moore, 2008; Siegel, 2003). International students with the grasp of only grammatical competence would produce linguistically accurate but socially dysfunctional communications (Celce-Murcia, 2007). This study shows that group work has improved Chinese graduate students' sociolinguistic awareness and competence by equipping them with socio-cultural knowledge and norms of speaking of the host country. Group work immerses Chinese graduate students in a small cultural community where most members come from the U.S. culture. U.S. sociolinguistic features are "woven intricately into the very fiber of every member of the group and is a controlling influence" (Kohls, 2001, p. 26) in the ways they live, think, speak, and behave. Chinese students' initial viewing of American group members' speech acts, behaviors, and even the overall host culture through their native cultural lens would certainly cause cultural conflicts, mutual misunderstandings, and pragmatic fossilization (Liu, 2011; Selinker, 1972).

Despite the fact that most of them might have learnt about U.S. sociolinguistic rules for speaking from various media, natural and appropriate application of these rules require repeated practices with native speakers. Through intensive involvement in meaning-based activities that are necessary for addressing a group task, Chinese students gradually acquire and internalize the conventions, customs, beliefs, and conversational norms of the target culture which are mirrored in group members' discourses and body movements. Group work provides such a realistic and meaningful language context for their ongoing enhancement of sociolinguistic competence. They develop their ability of adjusting their speech, conversation styles, and topics to fit the situation and socialize themselves to the host cultural environment. In this learning mode, Chinese students' achievement of a high level of sociolinguistic competence is not trained by teachers, but negotiated with the help of group members in a real L2 cultural context.

In addition, for L2 learners, successful communications not only need the command of grammatical and socio-cultural codes, but also require the ability of employing appropriate communication strategies to solve communication problems (Canale & Swain, 1980). Cohen (1998) and Dörnyei (1995) suggested that EFL learners' communicative proficiency can be improved through developing the ability of using communication strategies to compensate for their lack of target language sources. This study finds that group work contributes to the development of Chinese students' strategic competence by offering them with richly dynamic interactions that address the content objectives with native speakers within a normative socio-cultural milieu. When conversation breakdowns occur, they instinctively resort to some strategies including topic avoidance, message abandonment, approximation, circumlocution, stalling, drawing, or paralinguistic behaviors. Practical success and failures in achieving initial communication purposes tell them the effects of every kind of communication strategy. In this study, Chinese graduate students' increasing awareness of adopting achievement strategies rather than reduction strategies implies their improvement in strategic competence and English proficiency. Their opinions of reduction strategies are in line with previous studies that reduction strategies are negative for mutual understanding and common among low-proficiency-level speakers of a foreign language (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Faerch & Kasper, 1983). Nakatani (2006) stated that using achievement strategies are regarded as good learners' behaviors because of their efforts to achieve effective and successful communications, but using reduction strategies are common among low-proficiency learners since they avoid solving communication problems and give up in conveying messages. Therefore, Chinese students' enhancement in strategic competence indicates as well as further advances the improvement of their English communicative competence.

To sum up, this study found students' changes in attitudes and lived experiences with group work and provided an in-depth analysis of the effects of group work on Chinese international graduate students' English communicative competence based on Canale and Swain's (1980) theory, which has not been addressed before. It is concluded that the best way to learn a foreign language is to absorb and internalize it through natural social and cultural negotiations. As suggested by this study, group work in an authentic language context serves as a valuable language resource that makes more readily available to overseas students the knowledge and culturally related interactions of practicing English needed to achieve curriculum and communication goals.

Limitations

There are two limitations in this study. First, the sample size is small. The participants who come from one public research university cannot represent all the Chinese international graduate students in the United States. Thus, the results of this study should be cautiously

generalized to other cases. Second, the data are collected only from interviews, so methodological triangulation is not employed. Methodological triangulation could increase the validity of the results by involving using more than one method to gather data, such as interviews, observations, questionnaires, and documents (Denzin, 2006). Therefore, member checking and peer debriefing are conducted to enhance the trustworthiness of this study,

Implications

The findings of this study will be of practical importance to educational researchers, international students, and university EFL instruction in China. First, this study contributes to the literature on group work and foreign language communicative competence and has implications for educational researchers. Further study can address the relationships between the time for adjustment to group work and individual variables such as age, gender, English proficiency, length of stay, educational background, and discipline. Researchers could also study international students' lived experiences in language socialization in their involvement in group work. Similar research should be conducted into the effects of group work on English communicative competence of international graduate students from other nationalities, which would enrich knowledge about this issue.

Second, drawing on these Chinese graduate students' lived experiences in group work, future international students from China as well as from other countries where teacher-centered instruction have been emphasized could become familiar with group work, its purposes, advantages, and effects on their English communicative competence, so that they are able to overcome the difficulties and adjust better to this learning mode and even to the American educational environment as soon as possible.

Third, based on the results of this study, university EFL teachers and administrators in China should realize the inadequacy of their EFL teaching in meeting overseas Chinese students' daily communication requirements. They need to conceptualize strategies for solving the problems existing in current EFL instruction, such as playing a growing importance on English speaking and listening proficiency, creating more effective communication opportunities both inside and outside the class with NSs of English, or involving a variety of accents in listening materials. Furthermore, they should realize the need of incorporating cultural knowledge and communication strategies into foreign language curricula to improve students' communicative competence in a comprehensive way.

Conclusions

The results of this study demonstrate that Chinese international graduate students' attitudes towards group work go through changes from initial dislike to noticeable enthusiasm for participation. Their initial dislike is grounded in their limited English speaking and listening proficiency as well as in the pedagogical cultural conflictions between the two nations. Afterwards, they gradually adapt themselves to it in order to succeed in the new academic environment.

This study shows that besides facilitating students' grasp of curriculum contents, group work under natural English-speaking settings contributes to the development of Chinese students' English communicative competence in terms of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. It facilitates EFL learners' assimilation of target language through a communicative learning process. Their acquisitions of these three kinds of competence are integrated and reciprocal. With their increasing improvement in communicative competence through group work, they are able to speak appropriately in a wide variety of settings, which would advances their socialization to the host culture.

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Article Citation

Xue, M. (2013). Effects of group work on English communicative competence of Chinese international graduates in United States institutions of higher education. *The Qualitative Report, 18*(Art. 14), 1-19. Retrieved from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR18/xue14.pdf