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Creating a Supportive Dialogic Environment: How a Group of Chinese Students Experience Collaborative Learning in an Intensive Reading English Class

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Creating a Supportive Dialogical Environment:
How a Group of Chinese Students Experience Collaborative Learning
in an Intensive Reading English Class

A Dissertation Presented for
the Doctor of Philosophy Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Rong Li
December 1, 2011

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Tiechuan Cao,
our son, Yue Cao, and my mother, Guixiang Wang
for their patience, love and support as I pursued my goals
and in memory of my father Hongshun Li.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate how a group of Chinese students made meaning of their collaborative learning experiences as they engaged in creating a supportive dialogical environment in an Intensive English Reading class. The class utilized dialogue as inquiry along with activities that facilitated communication to approach the learning process. These activities included: pre-class writing, in-class presentations, after-class reflections, and small group online discussions. Students and teacher engaged one another in questioning and responding that implemented a process of reflective dialogue about texts and knowledge of language.

Thirty sophomore English major students participated in this study, ten of whom were randomly selected for final participation. Data sources consisted of transcriptions from phenomenological interviews, student weekly and final written reflections, and researcher's field notes. Analysis of these data yielded four themes: relationship, confidence, engagement, and change. That the four themes overlap suggests that they mutually reinforce one another to make students' learning experiences collaborative.

Results indicate that creating a socially, affectively, and pedagogically-supported dialogical environment promotes students' communication with others that involves a great deal of creative and reflective doing and thinking. The results have implications for foreign language teachers, educators, and researchers interested in performing action research in their practice.

Preface

  I have been teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) for many years and, I will concede, in virtually the same way as I had been taught years ago: students read the text, I explain the grammar, and we go through exercises together after reading each text and situation. I knew it was boring because sometimes some students had already understood the text before they came to the classroom, but I had no idea how else to proceed if I could not convey what I know and explain it to students. Once in a while, for a change, I asked my students to teach or present in class what they had learned from the text, only to find there was no difference between their way of teaching and mine--we read the text, paraphrased sentences, and went through grammar exercises after the text. In short, I was not only teaching English, but, ironically, I was also passing on a teaching method I did not find completely satisfying.

  It would be incorrect to say that I did not want to improve. The opposite was true: I was constantly thinking about what I could do to improve my teaching, but my thinking was always limited to how I might best transmit into the students' minds the knowledge that I had gained from texts. I followed the text closely because I believed that texts were the only legitimate sources of knowledge. However, I ignored the fact that students did not come to classroom empty-headed in the first place. To the contrary, they came with their life stories and previous learning experiences, which could become valuable sources of language input if they were provided with opportunities to respond in an adaptive and flexible learning environment. I did not realize this explicitly until I took Reflective

Practice (RP), a course offered by the Educational Psychology of the University of Tennessee (UT).

This course stood out for me as different in many ways. The professor did not place us in rows but invited us to sit in a circle. Instead of giving a lecture, the professor facilitated a dialogue about students' own learning experiences. We were encouraged to pose questions rather than simply respond to them. Once in a while during the process, the professor asked us to "stop music" to reflect on what we previously dialogued about. Finally, as part of the learning process, the professor showed us how to make connections between conversations. This process, though seemingly easy to follow, was so powerful that it engaged the entire group in the teaching and learning process.

It was this personal experience that made me reflect on what impact dialogue may have on my students if I engaged them in dialogue in an Intensive Reading English (IRE) class. I made this connection because I thought, basically, both RP and IRE use language to arrive at meaning. If dialogue as a primary mode of discourse works well in RP, then why would it not be applied in IRE? In spring, 2004, I started to facilitate students to dialogue in our IRE class and the results were informative. I did a thematic analysis of the students' responses to questions I asked, but these questions were based on my experience and not the students' own experience. So, I may not have fully understood the full scope of students' experiences from their own perspective. I decided to expand my informal study and explore students' experiences in the more systematic manner of an action research project.

In this dissertation, I described a phenomenological study of engaging a group of Chinese students in learning English through dialogue as inquiry in a classroom context using Peters' (1991, 2002) DATA-DATA action research model. The first phase of DATA represents the four actions of Describe, Analyze, Theorize, and Act. Included in these steps are "identifying one's assumptions and feelings associated with practice, theorizing how these assumptions and feelings are functionally or dysfunctionally associated with practice, and acting on the basis of the resulting of theory of practice (Peters, 1991, p.1). Carrying out each step of the DATA model enabled me to reflect systematically on my teaching experience and to create ways to improve that experience. The second phase of DATA stands for the actions of Design, Analyze, (Re) Theorize, and Act, which serve as a continuation of what has already been started in the first phase (Peters, 1991).Working through this phase enabled me to develop research questions, design a study, collect and analyze data, and (re)theorize my practice based on the results.

I chose to use dialogue as inquiry to understand texts because of my strong belief that there is a connection between dialogue and language learning. Peters and Armstrong (1998) wrote that dialogue as a primary mode of discourse brought people to collaborate. Isaacs (1999) said dialogue "is about a shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together' (p.9). Gergen (1999) pointed out dialogue is "not just conversation in general, but a special kind of relationships in which change, growth, and new understanding are fostered" (p. 148). In this study, I defined dialogue as inquiry, as an interaction involving interpersonal communication in the form of questioning and answering by building ideas

in a group based upon shared previous interpretations of a concept or a topic under discussion.

Two aspects of teaching IRE captured my curiosity and became the focal points of this study. The first was students' experience of dialogue about texts and about themselves as language learners. The second was a need to determine if the social activities I designed based on Peters and Armstrong's (1998) version of collaborative learning (CL) influenced student experiences of dialogue. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate students' lived experience of dialogue and to understand how such experience influenced their learning and my teaching.

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter One provides a rich description of my practice as an EFL teacher in a Chinese university and our initial CL experiences in English learning classes. It also includes an in-depth analysis of my practice and the issues that I assumed needed to be addressed. In Chapter Two, I describe my practical theory that guided my approach to dealing with issues in my practice and my goal of improving my practice. Chapter Three describes my research design and procedures. Chapter Four presents my findings. In Chapter Five, I discuss the research findings in terms of my practical theory. Finally, in Chapter Six I discuss my conclusions, revisit my practical theory in light of my research findings, and discuss implications of my findings for my practice, the field of EFL, and further research. Perhaps the most significant personal outcome of the present research, however, will be its effect on the way I plan to teach after this experience.

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Chapter One

Description of My Practice

My action research project is situated at the site of my practice--Dalian University of Technology (DUT) -- one of the public universities in China. DUT has 15 schools, 32 school-level departments, and quite a number of research institutes, 25,000 students, and 3,200 faculty members. It is a research oriented four-year university.

The School of Foreign Languages of DUT consists of five departments and two research institutes. The English Department, where I have been teaching, offers courses mainly for English majors. The curriculum for English majors is composed of courses in three categories: 1) skill-related courses such as intensive reading, listening and speaking; 2) major-related courses such as linguistics, English literature and American culture; and 3) subject-related courses such as computer basics, foreign trade and business management.

IRE is a three-credit required course, which is offered continuously over three academic years spanning six semesters. The aim of this course is to foster and enhance students' overall capacities of using the English language. An IRE class usually involves students reading the text, the instructor explaining the grammar points, and students acquiring the background knowledge and understanding the meaning of the vocabulary as well as the text. Participating in classroom activities and doing assignments is intended to help students to obtain a better command of the grammar and vocabulary.

A regular IRE class is cohort-based and has about 20 students in it. They meet three times a week and for 90 minutes. An IRE teacher normally teaches the cohort continuously for two semesters of one academic year. The textbooks used for IRE class are nationally standardized

and vary in difficulty from the low-intermediate level to advanced. In addition to regular mid-term and final exams, students are required to pass Band-4 and Band-8 standardized English proficiency tests and oral tests of the same band in their sophomore and senior years. Language teaching and learning in an IRE class is thusly constrained by the grammar and vocabulary based, multiple-choice design of these tests.

 I have taught IRE for many years. I taught according to what I believed an IRE class should be like; that is, ensure that students 1) understand what is addressed in the text (content); 2) acquire both the literal meaning and the contextual meaning of the key words or expressions (vocabulary); 3) know how to use some of the specific structures such as reversion (grammar); 4) become aware of some related cultural or background knowledge (target culture); and 5) able to apply their learned knowledge to a new context (linguistic competence). To this end, I placed emphasis on memorization, repetition, and recitation in learning EFL.

My role as a teacher is to help my students understand what is to be learned, to organize them into classroom activities, to supervise them as they finish their out-of-class assignments, and to assess their progress by preparing them for a test. My teaching methods vary with different learning content and purposes. For example, I often assign my students to group discussions if I want them to explore the deep meaning of a text and to a role-play if I think they need to do more practice with the learned structures. However, no matter what I direct them to do, I remain the center of the class.

What my students do is listen to my explanation, understand the text, and memorize some new words and structures through practice. While there are 20 students in my class, I choose

only one at a time from the entire class to answer my question. If he/she gives a correct answer, I assume that everyone in my class understands the question and can formulate a similar answer.

There is little communication between my students and me in terms of teaching and learning, although sometimes during the break I do have a small talk with them about their concerns. Some suggest that we cover more in our class meeting time and others request that we slow down a little bit. Thinking that I am not able to satisfy everyone, I usually decide that their requests should be submissive to my syllabus.

Throughout my teaching career, I constantly thought about what I could do to improve my teaching, but my thinking was always limited to how I might best transmit the knowledge that I had gained from the text. I followed texts closely because I believed that they were the only legitimate source of knowledge. However, I ignored the fact that students did not come to the classroom empty-headed. They came with their life stories and previous learning experiences, which could become valuable sources of language input when they were provided with the opportunity to respond in an adaptive and flexible learning environment. I did not realize this until I came to sit in RP, where participants engaged in collaborative learning as they individually and collectively reflected on their experiences.

Our Initial CL Experiences

I facilitated my students in dialogue in two English classes. One was in an advanced IRE class, in spring, 2004.and the other was in an intermediate IRE class in summer, 2008. I describe what we did in these two classes in the following paragraphs.

In our first CL experience I facilitated 35 English majors to dialogue. We met twice a week and 90 minutes for each meeting. To begin with, we arranged our seats in a circle to create

a physical dialogical space. Then we spent our first class period familiarizing ourselves with

some of the dialogical skills, such as how to raise a question and how to ask back. Afterwards, I

divided the class into four groups and asked each group to facilitate a specific element of the

text. For instance, the background knowledge group would help the class understand some

background knowledge related to the text and the vocabulary group would provide the class with

the literal meaning of new words. We proceeded with dialogue followed by writing a weekly

reflection on what we discussed in class.

This CL experience lasted 14 weeks. Towards the end of the semester, I asked my

students to write a final reflection about this class and complete a close-ended survey

questionnaire[1] regarding their learning experiences. The results of the questionnaire revealed

three top-rated responses regarding dialogue: 1) We are motivated to interact with one another

(88.6% respondents agreed); 2) We have something to write when connecting to what we have

experienced (57.1% respondents agreed); and 3) We think actively when engaging in dialogue

(54.3% respondents agreed). Students described similar experiences in their final reflections.

I conducted a two-week pilot study in summer, 2008 by engaging 20 sophomore English

majors in dialogue in an intermediate IRE class. We met three times a week and 90 minutes for

each meeting. Because of the limited meeting hours, we did not dialogue about texts; rather, we

co-constructed meaning of our English learning experiences. By the end of two weeks, I asked

my students to submit their final reflections about the two-week CL experiences. I then

interviewed 6 randomly-selected participants by following semi-structured questions. The results

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[1] The questionnaire I administered to my class has 40 questions in it. My purpose of doing this was to seek students' feedback to CL experiences. n=35

of the interview and the final reflections agreed with what had been revealed in the questionnaire completed by the students of 2004.

The positive responses of my students to our CL experiences assured me that engaging students in dialogue contributed positively to teaching and learning EFL. However, I was not quite sure of two things: 1) What particular features did my dialogical pedagogy have that might contribute to teaching and learning EFL in our IRE class? 2) What role did dialogue play in getting students involved in CL experiences?

Analysis of My Practice

In this section I examine the assumptions that I had about the dialogical pedagogy that I used in my practice that I described in the above section. An analysis of these assumptions is intended to help me better understand how I have influenced my practice, especially my attempt to facilitate dialogue.

My Dialogical Pedagogy: Features and Effects

I believe that the dialogical pedagogy I used in my IRE classes has the following characteristics: Firstly, it is interaction-oriented. Engaging students in pre-, in- and post- class group activities involves them in CL through dialogue. For example, working together and talking about their division of labor before class involves students in collaboration. Facilitating in-class dialogue requires that student facilitators draw everyone into conversations by inviting them verbally to participate. The preparation of facilitation and the facilitation itself provides opportunities for students to communicate with one another.

Secondly, it allows every student in my class to voice their perspective. Unlike a lecture, dialogue gives every student an equal opportunity to share their understandings of the text being

studied. Their understandings can be their interpretations, insights, and/or stories about the topic under discussion. However, if I were the only speaker and if the learning situation did not create conditions for students to share, they might confine their perspectives and stories to their own world or they might never have these stories.

Thirdly, my pedagogy makes more opportunities for students to use the target language. Apart from speaking and listening which need to be accomplished through language use, writing a weekly reflection requires students to recollect what they have learned in class. Such writing helps them use and reuse the words and structures they have learned from reading texts or from communicating with others. The repeated use of learned vocabulary and structures in different contexts, as Swain and Lapkin (1998) suggest, reinforces students' language internalization.

Finally, seat arrangement and introduction of dialogue skills and strategies to my students enhance their interest in CL. Sitting in a circle instead of in rows with me standing in the front can help reduce students' fear of being considered as disturbing the class when they jump in by asking a question. Demonstrating to students some dialogue skills and strategies, such as showing respect for others, making connections with the context, and suspending one's judgment, contributes to participation (Peters & Armstrong, 1998).

Role of Dialogue in the CL Experience

The results of the survey and students' final reflections indicated that my dialogical pedagogy has influenced students' learning in a number of ways. But what role does dialogue play in our CL experiences? I believe that dialogue creates a situation in which, instead of my teaching a specific interpretation, students and I jointly construct meaning of the text. Such a meaning-making process is completed through interaction that takes the form of questioning,

responding, asking back, clarifying, and adjusting. By interacting with others in this way students construct and reconstruct their meaning.

In addition, dialogue with other students and me enables students to be more productive in language use than when they learn individually. This is because sharing with others their understandings of the text or raising questions for others to think about challenges them to use more of their transformed language than simply repeating what they have memorized when they try to answer the questions given by the teacher in a traditional classroom. Dialogue enables students to express their ideas beyond the literal meaning of the text. When engaging in dialogue, students need to incorporate the present experience into their past learning experience or alter that experience in light of new experience. The process of incorporation evoked by dialogue contributes to language production (Ziegler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2006; Richard-Amato 2003; Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002).

Furthermore, the interactive nature of dialogue can hold students together and enable learning. Like playing a game, dialogue has its own rules that students need to follow, for example, inviting a third party to participate and asking an open-ended question. When engaged in dialogue, students are bound together by these rules. Awareness of following these rules obliges students to be committed to classroom activities that encourage collaborative learning (Arnold, 1999; Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002).

My Concerns with the Practice of CL

My practice of CL was not without its challenges. For example, one thing that captured my attention was that, towards the middle of the semester, some students became less visibly

active in dialogue. They did not talk unless they were invited to do so. A second challenge, I

believe, came from my tendency to neglect creating conditions that support and sustain dialogue.

Reflection on these issues and concerns helped me identify two assumptions underlying

what I believed about dialogue as an *opportunity*. My first assumption was that dialogue would

offer students opportunities to interact with others because dialogue took place between two

persons. My second assumption was that students would automatically learn so long as they were

involved in dialogue because the interactive learning environment enabled their learning

experiences. Further reflection, however, helped me surface an additional question: Is the

opportunity I provided for my students a *quality* learning opportunity?

Crabbe (2003) defines an opportunity for second language (SL) or foreign language (FL)

learning as an access to any activity that is likely to lead to an increase in language knowledge or

skill. Crabbe suggests that a quality language learning opportunity should be oriented to meet

three domains of needs, whatever the teaching-learning context might be. The first domain of

needs includes language learning-oriented elements such as motivation, interaction, input, and

feedback effects. The second domain of needs inquires into context-oriented elements such as

what practice is valued in what context, what effect it appears to have, and what roles teachers

and students play. Management-oriented elements constitute the third domain of needs such as

how good practice can be established and fostered so that constant improvement can be

maintained.

Examining the opportunity I provided for my students from the perspective of Crabee's

(2003) three domains of quality, I realized that our CL experiences not only left me with hope

but also with challenge. For more than a decade, the education that my students had received

from the traditional teacher-centered classroom accustomed them to what Peters and Armstrong (1998) called "teaching by transmission; learning by reception" (p.78). When I engaged them in dialogue that led to meaning making, they might not have been ready for it, either psychologically or cognitively, or both. I had little knowledge, however, about how they viewed their learning opportunity for collaborative learning and what they were looking for in this situation. In a specific foreign language teaching and learning context, resources of authentic language input are supposed to be textbooks, newspapers, movies, TV programs, the Internet, and other such. When students were placed in a context where language sources were enabled by dialogue, they might not be fully committed to the practice that challenged them to reconsider the authority of knowledge. I, nevertheless, was unaware of the impact that this challenge might have on my students.

Ever since we took our first step towards dialogue, I assumed that CL happened in our class. This was because: 1) I no longer stood in the front giving a lecture; 2) We were seated in a circle; 3) I demonstrated to the students how they show respect for one another; 4) We jointly constructed knowledge about texts by asking and answering one another's questions; and 5) We were allowed to tell our different interpretations. I took our dialogue so much for granted that I overlooked other factors, such as attitude, previous learning experiences, language proficiency, and my facilitation, that might also affect the quality of dialogue and the participation of students. I came to wonder, what actions can I take in order to incorporate more such factors in my pedagogy and thus enhance my students' engagement in dialogue in our IRE class?

Chapter Two

My own Practical Theory and a Plan of Action

On the assumption that language learning as a complicated meaning-making process involves not only linguistic factors but also socio-psychological factors governing successful communication (Hymes, 1972), I believe that *creating a dialogical environment that incorporates social, affective, and pedagogical dimensions of support can help promote student engagement in dialogue.* I will address my practical theory from these four aspects: 1) How dialogue relates to FL teaching and learning; 2) How related theories of dialogue, CL, and community inquiry relate to my study; 3) How I understand a socially, affectively, and pedagogically supported dialogical environment; and 4) How I engage my students in creating such a supportive dialogical environment in our IRE class.

Dialogue and Language Teaching and Learning

The goal of language teaching and learning is to develop learners' language knowledge and language ability (Halliday, 1978; Anderson, 1983; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Language knowledge refers to what students know about the linguistic elements that compose the language such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Language ability refers to how well students are able use the language to communicate. In a foreign language setting, language development is primarily achieved through interactive activities. (Long, 1981, 1996; Selinger 1983; Swain & Lapkin; 1998; Lynch, 2001; Ohta, 2001).

Dialogue, characterized by interaction, involves the act of jointly constructing new knowledge in a collaborative event (Peters & Armstrong, 1998). When used for teaching and learning foreign language, dialogue as a mode of discourse can help promote students'

comprehension and production because interaction plays a full role in their engagement with language. For example, students have to listen in order to understand what others are speaking and, simultaneously, they have to speak in order to make themselves understood. As both listening and speaking are related to comprehension, opportunities to interact with others until mutual understanding is reached enable students to move beyond their current language receptive and expressive capacities (Swain, 1985; Pica, 1992; Gass, 1997; Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

   Dialogue as an interpersonal interaction also has the potential to create a learning community that represents different contexts for different participants who bring different learning experiences with them (Peters & Armstrong, 1998). A learning community is a "mini-society" nested in a large society because it has its own rules, regulations, and role relationships (Bruffee, 1999). Interaction in such a mini-society is essentially a social process involving all its participants in verbal and nonverbal interaction that manifests their value, judgment, and understanding of the world (Breen, 1985). Creating such a community in our IRE class was meant to reshape the relationship between students and the students and me. The reshaped teaching-learning relationship provides the student with opportunities to share how they make meaning of the text and why they did it that way. Thus, instead of one explanation coming from me, we have several interpretations of the topic under discussion from various sources. These diversely-interpreted communications generated from the dynamic, unpredictable dialogical interaction can widen the scope of knowledge and deepen understanding. However, such a potential has not been adequately explored, much less exploited (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

   Dialogue as an interpersonal interaction can promote the student's interest in group learning within the context of EFL. Language learning entails the student's active involvement in

communicative activities. Engaging students in dialogue in the IRE class can help enhance their interest in communication with one another by means of the target language because dialogue provides "increased opportunities for learner-learner interaction and greater topic control on the part of the learner" (Bruffee, 1999; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). The shared learning experience in the learner-learner interaction and the self-nominated topics as a result of flexibility given to the student can stimulate their curiosity about the topic under discussion and promote their engagement in learning as a community. Ellis (1999) and Yule and Gregory (1989) found that learners employ more communicative strategies and produce more comprehensible input when they communicate with peers than they do in a teacher-learner communication thereby enhancing their chances of comprehension and production.

Dialogue, due to its reflective nature, can help students develop their language ability in a constructive way (He, 2004; Donato and Adair-Hauck, 1992). Interaction and language development are interdependent on each other. However, interaction alone cannot enable a learner to absorb and sustain the "interactional data internally" (He, 2004, p.578). One must reflect on each interaction, make sense of what was said and determine what decision he/she could make for each given situation. In addition, reflection as a way of learning is not just reacting on a superficial level, it is thinking that "goes beyond the information given" (Bruner, 1973). When engaged in reflection through interaction, students are challenged to take a step beyond simply retrieving words from memory and move on to higher-order thinking and creatively producing ideas (He, 2004; Donato and Adair-Hauck, 1992). In their study, Donato and Adair-Hauck indicated that engaging groups in social interactions both in and outside the

classroom fosters the formation of linguistic awareness in learners and promotes language use and language retention.

Related Theories of Dialogue, CL, and Community Inquiry

My practical theory of creating a socially, affectively, and pedagogically supported dialogical environment is grounded in Peters and Armstrong's (1998) conceptualization of CL and guided by the socio-cultural perspective of language teaching and learning. In my elaboration of these concepts, I draw on Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) theory of dialogue and its relationship to language and Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) concept of a community of inquiry. Although the three theories are different in focus, there are at least two aspects that they share in common: their epistemological perspectives and their social dimensions. The theories promise a broader understanding of the ways in which CL is experienced in a foreign language teaching and learning setting and, for me, a stronger practical theory of what should work to enhance my engagement with students in classroom-based dialogue.

Peters and Armstrong's CL theory is described as having four elements at work:

- *Focus on construction.* Knowledge is jointly constructed through dialogue. Knowledge with a focus on construction involves how new knowledge – context, content, and relationship -- arise from the shared, observed actions and reflections as dialogue unfolds among the participants.

- *Multiple ways of knowing.* Knowledge constructed in a CL experience is group knowledge contributed by the individual's perspectives. Multiple ways of knowing involves such concepts as "knowing that," "knowing how," and "knowing from within"

(Shotter, 1994). A knowing from within represents how new knowledge occurs in a group as the group members are engaged in CL.

- *Dialogical space.* The joint construction of knowledge takes place in the creation of a dialogical environment, where a respectful and trusting relationship is built among the participants as they are involved in dialogue, where contexts are constructed and reconstructed for dialogue to move beyond the immediate encounters (utterances)in the mutual awareness of the social relationship, and where a physically comfortable location is provided.

- *Cycles of action and reflection.* Dialogue involves both action and reflection. Action is a general term referring to acts such as interaction, observation, and documentation made by participants in a dialogue. Any action starts from a reflection on the previous act and ends as an act to be reflected on, which forms a cycle. Cycles of action and reflection are not simply repetitive but spiral in its operation. Levelising theory (Peters & Ragland, 2005) explains how cycles of action and reflection in a dialogue work at different levels.

According to Peters (2008), the four elements interact with one another and work together to form the vital aspects of teaching and learning process called CL. Peters' (2008) description of the four elements of CL and their relationship with one another encompasses the three dimensions of dialogical support that I describe in the following section.

A Socially, Affectively, and Pedagogically Supported Dialogical Environment

A dialogical environment with a dimension of social support. In addressing community of inquiry in blended learning experiences, Garrison and Anderson, (2003), Garrison and Kanuka (2004), and Garrison et al. (2000) describe a dialogical learning environment that lends social

support to students' learning experience. This environment provides the conditions for open communication and group cohesion. Open communication as a category of social support includes such features as free and secure dialogue, negotiation, and agreement. Group cohesion as a second category of social support is associated with a sense of group commitment and open and purposeful communication that encourages collaboration. Personal relationships and common purposes are essential for a learning community to sustain itself.

I understand a dialogical environment with a dimension of social support in a FL classroom setting as a space, a context, and a relationship which enables participants to maintain awareness that learning is not limited to what individual students do alone; it is also a social act. In such a dialogical environment, the shared interest of the group is to create social discourse where students and teacher jointly construct new knowledge.

Traditional language teaching and learning emphasizes individual learning, which is embodied in time spent in word explanation and structure practice. Oftentimes, when students are engaged in dialogue, they have no idea why they should engage in dialogue, especially when they fail to see any difference in their grades. A dialogical environment with social dimension of support requires a teacher not only to be able to engage his/her students in dialogue but also help them develop social awareness that maintains dialogue. Social awareness here means students' capacity of being conscious of the continuous construction and cultivation of social relationships as they participate in dialogue. Social interrelationship among people is what helps ensure that students make meaning of words that constitute language (Moraes,1996).

Peters and Armstrong's (1998) analysis of the role of the utterance in creating a dialogical context and Peters' (2008) clarification of Shotter's (1994) "knowing from within"

emphasize the importance of creating a dialogical environment with social dimension of support. To illustrate his analysis of "in-between-ness," Peters (2008) writes about the effects of people's verbal and nonverbal expressions in construction of meaning. The main point of his analysis is that we understand ourselves through the lenses of others' utterances and other responses. Peters wrote:

> The in-between can be understood as the moment of meeting of self and other. …It is in the "gap" formed in the moment of one's responses to another's gesture that the greatest chance of meaning-making occurs. …It is here that self continues to be understood in terms of and from vantage point of the other. …interpersonal interaction of the kind that enables participants to jointly construct an always-changing space between them, into which they act and respond to each other's utterances and nonverbal gestures, in their co-constructed context. One's "outside" attention to both the other and the relation they jointly create thus leads to an "inside" understanding by the individual. (p. 6)

Here, Peters calls our attention not only to the social aspects involved in interaction but also how a joint moment of acting influences our understanding.

Through an analysis of language and society from Bakhtin's social and cultural perspective, Moraes (1996) explains why taking the social dimension into consideration is crucial for the process of teaching and learning a second language. She argues that since language and society coexist, language teaching and learning must be accomplished in a dialogical relationship that "makes the possibility for voices to be heard within a dialogic social awareness" (p. 116). Borrowing Bakhtin's words *the self* and *the other,* Moraes further asserts

that words do not mean anything unless they are placed in a specific social-dialogical context because "the meaning of a word is always connected to the social location of an individual" (p.36). Consistent with Peters, Moraes also emphasizes the importance of the discourse which is enriched, modified, and challenged through active participation with social awareness – establishing a series of complex interrelationships with verbal and nonverbal expressions and which is what constitutes the meaning of dialogue.

A dialogical environment with a dimension of affective support. Garrison and Anderson, (2003), Garrison and Kanuka (2004), Garrison et al. (2000) describe a dialogical environment with a dimension of affective support as a space that helps create the condition for emotional expression and attentiveness. Emotional expression as a category involves indicators such as humor and self-disclosure that is supposed to engender trust, respect, support, and a sense of belonging. Attentiveness as another category is an indication of mutual awareness and recognition of each other's contribution. According to Garrison and Kanuka (2004), a dialogical environment with a dimension of affective support provides the stabilizing and cohesive influence that balances the personal relationships and the shared academic purposes in a collaborative learning community.

I see a dialogical environment with a dimension of affective support in a foreign language classroom setting as a space, a context, and a relationship that enables participants to trustfully and respectfully engage in collaborative dialogue and have a sense of equality and a desire for participation. Such a dialogical environment creates space for fostering a mutual awareness that everyone in the group is regarded as a knowledge co-constructor as well as a discourse co-author (Peters, 2008).

A traditional foreign language classroom with students sitting one behind the other in rows and the teacher lecturing in the front manifests an unequal relationship between the teacher and the student. The physical distance as a result of seat arrangement reinforces the notion that the teacher is the sole knowledge authority and, therefore, further distances the teacher from the student (Gerlach, 1994). However, even though a change in seat arrangement into a more equitable environment plants seeds for students' showing respect for one another in a collaborative learning situation, their fear of making grammar mistakes or skepticism about the knowledge they have constructed through dialogue may prevent the seeds from yielding fruits. A dialogical environment with a dimension of affective support requires a teacher not only to be able to facilitate his/her class to create conditions that reduce anxieties and concerns but also to be aware that emotional/affective support should be provided while the participant is undergoing a change in thinking and act (Strang, 1958).

While the core of Peters and Armstrong's (1998) CL framework refers to a dialogical environment where joint construction of knowledge takes place, a special emphasis is given to a consideration of psychological aspects of learning. Peters and Armstrong (1998) suggest that showing upmost respect for one another is vital for creating a dialogical space as related to CL. Peters (2008) notes that development of a supportive atmosphere which encourages every participant to jointly construct an ever-changing context requires at least two essential conditions: 1) A physically comfortable place where the seating arrangement must be such that seeing and hearing verbal and nonverbal expressions is maximized; 2) A psychologically respectful and trusting relationship where interpersonal dynamics such as respect, trust, and willingness is developed as a result of attending to every single moment of joint action.

Bakhtin's (1981) concept of intersubjective aspects of language is intended to call our attention to emotionally supportive interrelations among students and between students and teacher. Taking a Bakhtinian perspective to social processes of language learning, Platt (2005) argues for a dialogical approach in which intersubjectivity plays an important role in enabling students to have confidence to engage with language and make it their own. According to Platt, intersubjectivity is achieved on occasions when interlocutors enter temporarily into their shared understanding – an understanding that encompasses both what has been said and what has not been said (signs, intonation, and facial expressions) (Voloshinov, 1976; Holquist, 1990). A similar result is reported in Iddings et al.'s (2005) study when they describe how the emotional/affective support that a group of learners demonstrated to each other induces a greater sense of confidence in helping them complete classroom activities.

A dialogical environment with a dimension of pedagogical support. Garrison and Anderson, (2003), Garrison and Kanuka (2004), Garrison et al. (2000) focus their definition of a dialogical environment with a dimension of pedagogical support in two general categories: the design of learning activities and the teacher's facilitation. Sharing personal meaning and focusing discussion are two primary indicators. Garrison et.al. emphasize that interaction and discourse plays a key role in higher-order collaborative learning but not without structure (design) and leadership (facilitation).

I view a dialogical environment with a dimension of pedagogical support in a FL classroom setting as a space, a context, and a relationship in which the activities designed and facilitated by a teacher should maximally accommodate the realization of the first two dimensions of support in order for collaborative learning to occur. A dialogical environment with

a dimension of pedagogical support requires a teacher to maintain awareness that the syllabus and methods he/she sets must help sustain students' full engagement in dialogue that in turn enables them to jointly construct new knowledge.

One of the manifestations of pedagogical support in a traditional class is that the teacher helps the students complete the activities and exercises provided by the textbook, which actually exerts direct control of the way the teacher teaches. Engaging students in dialogue as inquiry places demands on a teacher in a way that, instead of following the textbook rigidly, he/she has to think and decide how to make teaching "become a process of creating conditions in which collaborative learning can occur" (Gerlach, 1994, p. 10). A dialogical environment with a dimension of pedagogical support promises to enable a teacher to be constantly aware that there is less lecturing in a CL classroom than in a traditional classroom and that he/she plays multiple roles. The teacher may act as a demonstrator, a synthesizer, a co-constructor, an organizer, a designer, and a facilitator (Bruffee, 1982; Weiner, 1986; Gray, 2008).

Peters and Armstrong did not mention the concept of pedagogical support in their description of the CL elements. However, I believe that an emphasis on the crucial role of the teacher is implicated in their description of each of the four CL elements. For pedagogical support to occur, Peters and Armstrong focus their attention on two practices: facilitation and reflection. Facilitation includes designing assignments, demonstrating dialogical skills and strategies, and the teacher's role as a co-learner. Reflection includes helping students to reflect on their learning process and teacher's self reflection on his/her facilitation.

Bakhtin's (1981) notion of dialogue emphasizes pedagogical support in creating a dialogical environment. For Bakhtin, dialogue is a social activity and multivoiced. It not only has

the potential to involve the participants in the construction and reconstruction of language but also constitutes meaning of language (Moraes, 1996; Halasek, 1999). This view of dialogue acknowledges students as co-authors of knowledge (Halasek, 1999; Gray, 2008; Gina, 2005). Halasek contends that creating a dialogical classroom that invites students to attend to meaning making also relies on pedagogical support that ensures students to have opportunities to contribute actively to the classroom. She claims that a teacher should use all the resources available to help students develop a sense of how to go about making choices as they dialogue. She adds that once the students understand how dialogue influences and informs their way of seeing and constructing the world, they are in a position to free themselves from authoritative monologue.

Interrelations of the three dimensions of dialogical support. While I have described the three dimensions of support separately, I do not mean to imply that I favor one type of support over the other. Actually, the three dimensions of support should be simultaneously present to accommodate collaborative learning to occur. Of the three dimensions of support, the dimension of social support is most basic in successful learning because it directly impacts what students learn and how they learn. In other words, collaborative learning does not occur if a teacher simply places his/her students together and asks them to work on an assignment. A socially supported dialogical environment in a foreign language classroom should be one that provides opportunity for students to collaboratively construct meaning in jointly created communicative contexts for the purpose of broadening and deepening their capacity of language use. However, the dimension of social support alone is not sufficient to create and sustain a supportive dialogical environment. The creation of such an environment needs to be nourished by students'

willingness to participate in and the teacher's effective facilitation of communicative interaction (Strang, 1958; Flannery, 1994; Peters & Armstrong, 1998; Garrison, et al., 2000).

The dimension of affective support is vital to creating a supportive dialogical environment because it can directly influence student attitude toward participation. A respectful and trusting dialogical environment where students are willing to listen, free from fear of sharing their thoughts, and feeling invited to participate encourages authentic participation in joint construction of knowledge - seeking understanding from in-between-ness (Peters, 2008). The dialogical relationships built on mutual trust nourishes students' awareness of exercising patience with others, tolerance for alternatives, and respect for differences (Rice & Burbules, 1992). Conversely, the accomplishment of dialogical activities – the engagement in constructing knowledge of texts in my case – depends largely on students authentic participation and social and emotional/affective awareness.

If the dimension of social and affective support is necessary for fulfilling the goal of learning, the dimension of pedagogical support serves as a way to achieve the goal. Engaging students in carefully designed activities and dialogue as inquiry per se provides a number of ways by which a teacher can exert a vital influence on the development of students' social and affective awareness of dialogical environment. This includes demonstrating dialogical strategies and techniques, practicing reflective practice, examining actions, fostering mutual trust and respect, creating context for discourses, etc. However, engaging students in these dynamic activities depends primarily on a safe and comfortable dialogical environment that enables students to participate actively and think critically (Peters & Armstrong, 1998; Garrison, et al., 2000; Resnick, 1991).

Creating a Supportive Dialogical Environment in the IRE Class

To create a supportive dialogical environment that helps develop student language knowledge and ability, I need to engage my students in doing three things: 1) focus on making our own meanings through collaborative efforts; 2) increase the students' role as co-constructors; and 3) cultivate multiple-ways of thinking through actions and reflections. I will describe each of these in the following sections.

Focusing on making our meanings through our collaborative efforts. Language learning is systematic and requires practice. To understand a text, for example, we need to know the meanings of new words, the grammatical structures, the top-down ideas, and the background of the text. Since we only have 90 minutes for each class at my university, I cannot cover all the learning content by engaging my students in dialogue alone. Some learning content, such as grammar rules, can be better understood if I point them out and offer a brief explanation. Further, preparing students for nationwide standardized tests places more demand on language accuracy; that means I have to set aside some time for students to practice grammar and vocabulary. Narrowing the focus can increase opportunities for me to engage students in doing what is the best suited for CL (Gray, 2008).

Focusing on making our own meanings of the background knowledge can be an option to create a supportive dialogical environment. The background knowledge of a text has much to do with culture, history, important events, and the author's life story. By making our own meanings of the background knowledge, there is more room for students to elaborate on the topics of which they may otherwise have little knowledge. Engaging students in "dialogue" with the

author of the text or the people involved in a historical event creates context for them to construct new meanings by connecting their own stories with the author's.

Focusing on making our own meanings of the key concepts that occur in the text can be another option. By focusing on the key concepts, students can expand their reading comprehension from the sentence level to the text level or beyond. Because of the focus on the key concepts, students can be prevented from giving too much attention to some of the trivial linguistic units. Narrowing focus on the topics that students show interest in can promote their participation in perspective sharing, which involves a great deal of language construction and reconstruction.

Focusing on "knowing how" in the process of "knowing that" can be an additional possibility. By this focus, I mean that while I facilitate students' attempts to make meaning of the text, I engage them in reflecting on our learning process. This includes how to create a third place between the boundaries of two frames (Kostogriz, 2005) for a new meaning to emerge, how to turn one's life experiences into learning resources, and how to capture and respond to other participants' physical and emotional/affective reactions to the learning process. Focusing on "knowing how" enables students to give more attention to seeing a "forest" rather than seeing a "tree" in the process and eventually improves their ability to effectively make their own meaning through collaboration.

Increasing the students' role as co-constructors. Increasing the students' role as co-constructors means reducing my role as a solely knowledge transmitter. For this process to work, I have to set myself free from the myth that students can learn more if only I teach by transmission of my knowledge to them. I also need to set aside the fear of feeling guilty if I fail

to answer a question that students raised during this process. Increasing the students' role as co-constructors requires me to reexamine my role as a teacher and reflect on how I facilitate students to make the most of their own resources such as their language skills, their linguistic knowledge, and their own narratives about the world.

Increasing the students' role as co-constructors implies that we should respect each other's perspectives and recognize each other's ownership of knowledge. To this end, we need to work together to create a context, which includes a physically comfortable dialogical place and foster psychologically respectful and trustful relationships among the students. In terms of the former, I need to help my students to be aware of what impact the physical dialogical environment may bring to their meaning making by demonstrating to them how to observe each other's verbal and nonverbal reactions to the dynamic process. Paying attention to physical reactions not only suggests that we show respect for each other but also indicates how we relate to each other in the interaction. In terms of latter, I need to facilitate my students to develop some of the skills and strategies used for dialogue, such as listening to others carefully, whether or not they are good English speakers, inviting the group members to a conversation by asking open-ended questions and asking back, and slowing down to examine assumptions. These skills and strategies play a critical role in developing and sustaining a respectful and trustful relationship.

Cultivating multiple-ways of thinking through actions and reflections. By multiple ways of thinking I mean shared thinking that happens in the moment of individual and group reflections triggered by an utterance from within the group experience. Engaging students in group reflections not only promotes their mutual understanding but also deepens their thinking, eventually developing the relationship between them. At least three skills need to be learned to

cultivate our shared thinking: 1) learning how we ask open-ended questions and ask back; 2) learning how we reflect on the questions being asked, especially the asking-back questions; and 3) learning how we examine ourselves in how we attend to a new relationship being established with others in the moment of dialogue (Peters, 2008).

A Plan of Action

In the preceding sections, I described the relationship between dialogue and foreign language teaching and learning. I also described how related theories of dialogue, CL, and community inquiry relate to my study. Within this context, I presented my practical theory of what is needed to put these ideas into my practice. In the following section, I describe the plan of action that I used to apply this theory.

Before I started my classroom application, I did the following things. I first talked to the department head about my research in order to gain his support. Then I talked to the regular instructor who worked with me for the entire period of our practice with collaborative learning. (Actually, she and I worked together for my pilot study in the summer of 2008.) Our talk covered such issues as class meetings, reading chapters, classroom relocation, achievement assessment, and the regular instructor's role in the practice. I also talked to the instructor about any possible impact that my replacement of her might have on the activities and assignments, the final exam, the grading scale, and the teaching and learning focus. I informed the administrator of my research and gained his agreement on my teaching in this class. I requested for a classroom where seats and desks could be rearranged as necessary and created an online discussion forum and made it available to the students in this class. At this point, I was ready to initiate my new approach to teaching my classes.

I engaged 30 sophomore English majors in an 8-week collaborative English learning experience in our IRE class, which met four times a week and 90 minutes for each meeting. I used our first meeting for students and me to get to know each other. I gave each student a copy of my syllabus and, very briefly, told them what we were going to do and how we were going to do it within these 8 weeks.

I spent the first two weeks familiarizing my students with some basic dialogue skills and strategies. To start with, I asked them to write about their English learning experiences and posted their writing on the online forum before class. I asked two students to present their learning experiences in class before we dialogued. I then facilitated students to dialogue about the learning experiences shared by the presenters. I started by asking questions and asking back. For example, when the presenter finished speaking, I would ask the entire group: "What stood out for you from her experience?" Following this, student A might say: "I'm impressed by what she said about the teacher's encouragement." Student B might say: "Her experience reminded me of how my mother encouraged me when I was a child." Student C might then ask student B: "Do you mean that you mother would say 'Come on, you can do that' when you actually failed to do a good job?" I then might ask student C: "Why did you ask?" (asking back). This is how students got involved in dialogue and started to follow what I was doing as a facilitator of their dialogue. I stopped them somewhere in the middle of the process for them to think about what was happening to our dialogue, for example, when there was no dialogue between two speakers or when they missed an action (verbal or nonverbal) that might lead to the occurrence of knowing. I also asked my students to write reflections on their dialogue experiences and posted their writing on the forum for peers' response. I wrote my responses to their reflections.

For the rest of the six-week period, as my students were getting better at dialogue skills, I started engaging them in dialogue about texts. Although I still asked two students to present in class, what they shared with us were not their past English learning experiences, rather, they told us about the text, the author, and the related background information. There was a division of labor among the presenters who formed a small group of four. Each presenter focused on one component at a time, for instance, if presenter A told us about the author, then presenter B would provide us with some related background information. The presenters were also co-facilitators. They, working as a small group, took turns to present what they read about the text and co-facilitated the class to dialogue. For other aspects of learning, such as grammar and writing strategies, I used discussion or lecture to help them arrive at their understanding.

Although the entire class face-to-face dialogue was the primary part of my overall pedagogy, I incorporated in it small group online discussions. There were two reasons for my doing so: 1) The size of our class is relatively too big, which might influence the quality of dialogue and the participation of students (Bruffee, 1999; Gerlach, 1994; Oxford, 1997); and 2) Online small group discussions not only help to make the heuristic process visible but also can be retained for study (Ziegler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2006). As there were 30 students in this class, I divided the class into two large groups. The two large groups met, alternately, twice in class and twice online each week. For face-to-face class meetings, they worked with me; for online meetings, they worked with their regular professor. The large group was further divided into subgroups with four members in each subgroup. As our online discussions were synchronic, smaller groups seemed to be better managed. The four subgroup members were also in the same presentation group.

Our 8-week collaborative English learning experiences included the following activities and assignments:

- before-class reading reflection (written and posted on the discussion forum)

- in-class large group dialogue (30 students for the first two weeks for training and 15 students for the remaining six weeks)

- after-class learning process reflection (written and posted on the discussion forum)

- online small group discussions (synchronic and topic-based)

- individual in-class presentation

- small group report of labor division regarding presentation (written and posted on the discussion forum)

- small group report of learning experience regarding online discussions (written and posted on the discussion forum)

- final reflection on the entire learning experience (written and posted on the discussion forum)

By engaging students in dialogue as well as other activities facilitated by dialogue, I was able to put into action my practical theory about a supportive dialogical environment and its influence on EFL teaching and learning.

In the next Chapter, I describe my research design (Design), a step leading to the second phase of DATA-DATA.

Chapter Three

Research Design and Procedures

As my study was located in my own practice and the participants were my students, it was action research. Herr and Anderson (2005) describe this kind of research as "insider action research" (p.31). This research allowed me to inquire into what was happening in my practice and informed me how and what I could do to improve the practice. This research also required me to step back from my practice to examine my role both as a practitioner and as a researcher (Peters, Creekmore, & Duncan, in press; Ragland, 2006).

Unlike research that allows one to predict and control the topic under investigation, phenomenological research seeks to understand the essential structure of the experience of people whose lives are the subject of an investigation (Polkinghorne, 1989). As the purpose of my study was to describe students' lived experience of dialogue and to understand how such experience influenced their learning and my teaching, a phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis was thought to be most suitable for this research.

According to Polkinghorne (1989), phenomenological research addresses the question of *what* and *not why* because the essential structure consists of the elements that are necessary for an experience to present itself as what it is. (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). My study was limited to this focus on participants' experiences. I made no attempt to assess student outcomes, such as their achievement gain or other indicators' change in content mastery.

Research Question

My overarching question concerning my practice was: What happens as I engage a group of sophomore English students in creating a supportive dialogical environment in our IRE class?

More specifically, my research question was: *How do sophomore English students experience creating a supportive dialogical environment in an IRE class?* A holistic answer to this question helped me understand how students make meaning of CL through what we did in the classroom.

Selection of Participants

Participants involved in the study were a class of 30 sophomore English majors in the English Department of DUT. Among them, 13 were female students and 17 were male students. I chose this class as a site for my research because the students had studied at the university for one and half years; their English was good enough for communication; and they had finished the Standardized Band-4 (intermediate-high level) English Proficiency Test by the time I worked with them. The students, aged 19-20, were required to take the IRE course. I worked with them for 8 weeks starting from the first week of May and ending in the middle of July.

During the first two weeks of our CL practice, I told my students about my intention to study some aspects of my teaching and their experiences in the class. I told them that they would be asked if they would like to voluntarily permit their written and interview responses to be included as data for the study when the course was over. I also told them that I would not identify them with any of the data until after their grades were posted. I assured them that I would not give them more work than the course required, whether or not they eventually agreed to have their data included in the study. Finally, I informed them that there were no penalties or any other disadvantage to students who chose not to volunteer.

In the last week of the CL practice, the regular instructor and I met with the students during a scheduled class period. I explained in more detail the purpose of my study, the methodology, and the implications of the study. I emphasized that I would not know the names

of volunteers until grades had been submitted after the course ended. I then left the room. The regular instructor distributed copies of an Informed Consent Form to all the students after I left the classroom. She briefly discussed the contents of the form before she asked students to read it. She answered questions that students raised about the form and the study. After the regular instructor was confident that all students understood the terms of agreement to participate or not participate in the study, she asked all of the students who agreed to participate to sign the form. She collected the forms from the students, made copies of signed forms in the department office, and returned copies to the students.

The regular instructor stored the forms and the list of names of volunteers in a locked drawer in her office. She did not reveal the names of the volunteer students to me until after final grades for all of the students were posted. In the very last meeting, when all of the students were seated in the classroom, the regular instructor put the names of volunteer students on small pieces of paper, folded and placed them in a box. She then randomly drew ten names from the box as the participant students of my interviews.

Table 1. Description of participants

Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Pseudonym	Eric	Robert	Tim	Mollie	Philip	Gina	Lisa	Barbara	Steve	Bill
Gender	m.	m.	m.	f.	m.	f.	f.	f.	m.	m.

Ten participants were interviewed (see Table 1). Four of the participants were female students and six were male students. The participants' age ranged from 19-20. All of the participants were sophomore English majors.

According to Creswell (1998), the accepted number of participants for long interviews is 6-12, because fewer cannot provide enough data for a meaningful collection and more will make the data analysis unmanageably overwhelming.

Data Collection

The data sources of this study included audio taped interviews, my field notes, and students' written reflections. Moustakas (1994) suggested that a phenomenological interview is particularly suited to a study that seeks a rich description of the life world of another person(s). Bogden and Biklen (2007) wrote that field notes can be an important supplement to other data collecting methods such as the phenomenological interview. Student weekly and final reflections were used for providing relevant examples that highlighted what emerged in the interviews.

Bracketing Interview

One of the phenomenology group members of the School of Nursing gave me a bracketing interview about the topic of my proposed research study before I conducted my phenomenological interviews with students. The bracketing interview was conducted in the manner suggested by Thomas and Pollio (2002), following the tradition of Husserl's (1931) phenomenology. Participating in such an interview before meeting with students helped me address explicitly my assumptions and biases about engaging in the research process. For example, I learned that one of my assumptions was that dialogue not only encourages speaking but also triggers thinking and reflecting that promote language learning through language use. The multiple perspectives of the phenomenology group members assisted me in bracketing my biases throughout the investigative process, both during the interview phase and interpretive phase.

Student Interviews

I conducted a face-to-face interview with participants in my study during the first week after the course was over. These interviews took place in a reserved study room of Bochuan Library of DUT at a mutually convenient time. The interview lasted about an hour and followed Thomas and Pollio's (2002, pp. 27-30) guidelines for conducting a phenomenological interview. Before doing these interviews, I conducted a pilot interview with one of the volunteer students (with her permission) to examine the time needed, the amount of energy used, and the clarity of the interview questions, as suggested by Creswell (1998). Based on the amount of time and energy used by both participants, I modified my interview schedule by reducing the amount of work from meeting six students within a single day to a maximum of four interviews per day.

After a few minutes of "ice-breaking" conversation, the interview would proceed naturally to the key phenomenological question: "What stood out for you over the past few weeks in this course? When needed, I would ask prompting questions such as "Tell me about one of the classes that you have had in this course" or "Tell me about yourself in this experience" or "Say more about ..." I encouraged students to describe their lived experiences in the manner suggested by Thomas and Pollio (2002, pp. 24-27). Thomas and Pollio's suggestions for producing a lived-experience description include a focus on a particular example or incident of the object of experience, a description of feelings and emotions, and a clarification for any statement not fully understood. I also made notes immediately after each student interview. The audio taped interviews were transcribed verbatim for later analysis.

My Field Notes

I kept typed, reflexive field notes throughout the eight weeks, following procedures suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2003, pp.111-119). These field notes included my personal reflections on events, problems, and progress made by students and myself as we experienced CL in our IRE class. Taking field notes helped me keep a record of insights I gained and augment the interview transcripts with examples of my own and students' experiences (Van Manen, 1990; Creswell, 1998; Moustakas 1994, Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Student Weekly and Final Reflections

Course requirements included a provision for all students to write a weekly reflection and post it on an electronic board to be read by and responded to by other students. The weekly reflections served specific purposes: 1) for students to respond to weekly open-ended questions (e.g."What stood out for you this week in this course?"); and 2) to promote dialogue among students. Participant students' weekly reflections were used, when needed, as examples of what had emerged from the interviews.

The course also required students to write a final reflection about the course. Information from the final reflections was used in the same manner as described for weekly reflections.

Data Analysis

I implemented a phenomenological analysis using a methodology developed by Colaizzi's (1978). My data analysis involved the following four steps:

1) Audio-taped interviews of 10 participant students were transcribed and significant statements were extracted from these transcriptions. The duplicated statements and the statements irrelevant to each research participant's experience were discarded.

2) Meaning units were formulated from the significant statements by reading, rereading, and reflecting on the significant statements in the original transcriptions.

3) The formulated meaning units were organized into clusters of themes. These clusters were referred back to the original descriptions in order to validate them.

4) An overall textual-structural description of the phenomenon was constructed by integrating the results of the analysis.

The phenomenology research group of the School of Nursing assisted me in developing an overall thematic structure of data. The interpretative process proceeded as follows: 1) Each of the interview transcripts was read by members of the group; 2) The members of the group evaluated textual evidence for each specific theme proposed; and 3) A specific theme was identified to characterize a student's description when it was agreed upon by all of the group members. Through the interpretative process, I developed ten summaries of protocols – textual descriptions of students (For an example of a textual description, see Appendix A). Each protocol was described in terms of salient themes and compared to all remaining interviews to determine whether similar themes appeared across protocols. When all relevant cross-sortings and cross-comparisons had been completed, I brought the summaries of the protocols back to the group for another review by its members. As an important step leading to validity, I sent the ten participants through emails the transcriptions of their interviews and the textual descriptions. I asked them if the descriptions formulated validated their original experiences and only one participant responded telling me that it was true to his experience.

Ethical Considerations

I established an agreement with each participant student and sought his/her informed consent for individual participation. I also obtained a written agreement to conduct this study from both the School of Foreign Languages of DUT and the Research Office of DUT.

Because my project was first-person phenomenological action research situated in my own practice, I would emphasize that the process of my research was open-ended and the methods and procedures were allowed to change as needed for "accuracy, safety, and comfort" (Moustakas, 1994, p.110). Participants were free to withdraw at any time. Data collected were kept confidential by assigning pseudonyms to each transcript and using these pseudonyms for reporting data. No personally identifying information was used in the report of findings.

Members of the phenomenology research group helping me with data analysis and the graduate students hired to transcribe audio-taped recordings were required to sign an agreement to keep data confidential. Data and consent forms were kept securely stored in a locked cabinet in the office of my major professor, located in 519 Jane and David Bailey Education Complex. The data sources, including transcriptions, tapes, and other forms of data used in the analysis were to be destroyed upon the completion of the study. Consent forms were to be stored for three years following the study.

Positioning

How I positioned myself as I entered this project would affect what I was researching. As a researcher, I might be inclined toward overemphasizing the value of my pedagogy without being fully aware of such a bias. As a professor teaching at DUT for many years, I might tend to be too self-confident about my facilitation and my relationship with students to make any meaningful reflections on what I did in terms of these aspects. As a doctoral student in the CL

program, I might be very likely to share with my students my personal thoughts, feelings, and

perceptions about CL that might cast a shadow over their conscious description of their lived

experiences. Similarly, how students position me and themselves would influence their

participation, their relationships to me, and the process of my research.

Although it is impossible to avoid the influence that my multiple positions would have on

my research, having an honest attitude, opening to change and differences, and reflecting

critically on my biases and assumptions are important parts of taking responsibility for the

validity of the research process (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 1998).

Standards of Quality

Lincoln and Guba (1985) use the terms "credibility," "transferability," "dependability,"

and "confirmability" as criteria to evaluate the validity of qualitative studies. Some of the

techniques they suggest pertaining to these criteria include: 1) Use a triangulation of methods; 2)

A rich and thick description should be provided for the reader to determine whether the findings

can be transferred to other settings; 3) Methods, procedures, and findings should be adjusted to

the changing context; and 4) The research process should be audited for establishing both

dependability and confirmability.

I used the criteria suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to help establish the quality of

my research. In addition to the in-depth interview, I used my field notes, students' weekly and

final reflections, and the interpretative research group to triangulate data of sources and methods.

I also clarified my biases and assumptions that would influence how I approach to my study in

the bracketing interview. As a final step, I asked a member of the phenomenology research group

to review both the process and findings of my study (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 1998). Some of the questions addressed by the audit included:

1. Are the finding grounded in and supported by data?

2. Does the overall structural description provide an accurate picture of the shared features that are reflected in the examples collected?

3. Is the transcription accurate, and does it convey the meaning of the oral presentation in the interview?

4. In the analysis of the transcriptions, were there conclusions other than those offered by the researcher that could have been derived?

5. Is the structural description in a specific situation, or does it hold in general for the experience in other situations? (Moustakas, 1994)

Feedback from this audit helped me to discover several places where I needed to provide further clarification for my readers. For example, one major clarification was that I needed to describe in more detail in the Results section how the themes as illustrated in the Figure relate to one another and to dialogue. Another clarification required me to add further details about how I came to discuss certain themes. To do this, I went back to the actual words of the students so that I could be sure all that I discussed resulted from their own description of their lived experiences in the appropriate context. Making these changes developed the overall rigor of my action research study.

Chapter Four

Results

The results provide a rich description of the experiences of sophomore English majors regarding their responses to language teaching and learning, dialogue and the creation of a learning community. To present these results, I have organized them into the following four major themes: 1) Relationship; 2) Confidence; 3) Engagement; and 4) Change. For each theme, I provide supporting excerpts from the interview transcripts that captured the nature of the theme. These quotes are referenced by participants' pseudonyms and line numbers in the original transcripts. I also provide supporting excerpts from students' weekly and/or final reflections as well as from my field notes that highlighted the nature of the theme in some places where incidences of the student's experience are needed.

Theme 1- Relationship

The theme of relationship was described both in terms of people and content. In the first case, students talked about their feelings of interpersonal relationship with classmates, whereas in the second case, they described how they made connections between/among their different aspects of understandings of text. The theme was further organized into five sub-themes: 1) freedom, 2) equality, 3) openness, 4) responsibility, and 5) closeness.

Subtheme 1): Freedom

Freedom was one of the characteristics that stood out for all of the participants in their experiences with dialogue in the context of language learning. Students noted that they were free to express themselves either in speaking or in writing. Words such as "freely" "voluntarily" or "naturally" were used alternatively by students to portray the situation in which they raised, and

answered, questions without feeling restricted. Robert, for example, reported that "stating his ideas freely in class" was like talking with a friend in an "English corner" (a place where English learners voluntarily get together to practice English). Barbara noted that whatever she said she would not be "denied" because there were no "absolutely wrong or absolutely correct answers." Several students also described freedom as "being free" to choose not only what to say but also how to say it. In terms of writing, freedom was defined by some students as "really writing" because "you have something to write" instead of having your thoughts "confined to the reference book." Freedom was experienced by some students as being allowed to sit in a circle where they were able to see each other and their facial expressions. Specific examples of Subtheme 1 are as follows:

a. *If I have a different idea, I just state it. That is my understanding of this question. So I'm not afraid to be wrong, to be different from others. If they accept my idea, that's ok. If they don't, that is also ok. The teacher will not criticize me for a wrong answer or for going to extremes. That's my understanding just from my point of view to see, to feel what the author wants to tell us.* (Robert, 16-20)

b. *In Speaking English class, we feel we have to speak English, because it is our task, our assignment to practice English. But in this class, it happens so naturally. We don't have to force ourselves to speak. We do this to communicate with others, with our members.* (Barbara, 200-205)

c. *I liked to write after-class reflection, because you told us not to mind much, and put down what we thought. At then, writing a reflection was like writing a diary. Although*

they may not be well organized, I at least expressed what I want to share with my

classmates. (Philip, 203-206)

d. *Sitting in a circle we can see each other. We can see each other's facial expression so*

we can see…er…imagine, we can think out what others are thinking. (Lisa, 51-52)

e. *But in this class when you say something, perhaps he or she didn't agree with you, but*

this is OK, we can have our own understanding. So I think this is the reason why I am

more active in this class, because I'm very sure that no matter what I say I will not be

denied, I am trying to make my own contribution. (Barbara, 141-144)

Subtheme 2): Equality

Another aspect of learning through dialogue that stood out for the students was equality. Students' descriptions of their experiences that help constitute this theme referred to having an equal opportunity to raise or answer questions posed in class either by a student or the teacher. This contrasted with what they usually did in a traditional class where it was always the teacher who "must ask us something and we say something." Five of the ten students reported that in the CL class they were not afraid of being thought of as "disrupting" the class or "disrespecting" the teacher as they usually were for raising questions in class while the teacher was lecturing. Robert noted that he was not "criticized" for saying something "ridiculous," which, he assumed, was not the case in a traditional class. Moreover, students realized that, unlike the traditional class where the teacher was the center, in the CL class, "Everyone was the host." Equality was also described

by several[2] students in terms of what they called "equal environment" where they did not pursue "agreement" as to the "correct answer." Specific examples of Subtheme 2 are as follows:

a. *Dialogue itself is an equal environment because in a common dialogue, people just… I say something; you say something; he says something; she says something… And everyone has the same opportunity to say something. And we moved this kind of environment to language learning class…The one who knows more must say more in the class and the one who knows fewer say fewer in the class.* (Eric, 119-123)

b. *The teacher never criticizes me for the wrong answer and for the extreme, the answer to the extreme point, the extreme. That's my understanding just from my point of view to see, to feel what the author want to tell us.* (Roger, 19-22)

c. *Because in former classes, teacher was the one who talked much. Students just read their books, and wrote. So I felt very embarrassed when I burst out. Although you even uttered some words, but others were all silent, I just felt that was very embarrassing. I thought it was disrupting the teacher or the classmates. But in collaborative learning classes, we were all talking. And we discussed, so asking questions was a normal thing.* (Mollie, 347-351)

d. *Maybe sometimes we argued with each other, but most of the time, we try our best to add more information to let each of us to judge which is suitable for us, and which is unacceptable, and this is very different because from the traditional class, we just try*

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[2] In some places of Chapter Five, I used the words "some" "several" "many" or "a number of" to indicate the number of participants. By using the word "some" I meant more than 3, "several" more than 4, "many" or "a number of" more than 5.

to find the answer, whether the war is cruel or not, whether we should seek peace and security, the way we seek peace and security. (Tim, 49-52)

Subtheme 3): Openness

The subtheme of openness largely concerned the student's experience of being open to different ideas, thoughts and perspectives when making meaning of the text on the basis of dialogue. Such openness was described by some students as "looking at things from different perspectives" "breaking the boundary of meaning" "getting rid of the fixed ideas" or "listening to others to find differences and similarities." Tim, for example, was aware of the fact that only by being open to different perspectives were students able to broaden and deepen their understanding. Mollie noted that there was always "a limit there" in one's interpretation and thinking from other's perspective could help "sweep away the limit." Robert talked extensively about how he stayed open while a less advanced English speaker was stating his idea by being tolerant of his classmate's inadequate English. Several students also reported that being open to each other's personal stories beyond the academic world helped them to understand each other as a person. Furthermore, openness was perceived by some students as a tendency to be open to "different ways of learning." Specific examples of Subtheme 3 are as follows:

a. *I was really shocked by the different ideas from my classmates. Girls, like Linda and Kathy, just believed that war is something very dangerous, cold and bloody, a lot of people died and innocent people lost their parents and families, this kind of things. On the opposite side, boys tend to be more rational to look at the war…This is very important because only by looking at things from different perspectives can we get a better understanding of it.* (Tim, 19-25)

b. *I think if in the former class, I can't stand it, because he took the time, our time. And his language is not very good, and he speaks so slowly and "Ah…Ah… tough!" That's too tough. But in this course…what we emphasized is different, so what we want to gain from others is different… we want the thought, so what we want is his idea. No matter how slow, how slowly he talked, we just want his idea, not the other.* (Roger, 92-104)

c. *…there is a limit there (to one's understanding). I just cannot think more beyond that. But other people have other kinds of limits… Sometimes, no matter how hard you tried, how much time you spent, you just couldn't get there. But when other people told you, you responded "Yes, that makes sense." I then asked myself "Why hadn't I thought of that?" So the limit is there… by collaborative learning, we can sweep the limit or break the limit.* (Mollie, 372-380)

d. *Although our participation may not add anything to meaning making, it brings difference. We arrive at better understanding because dialogue breaks the boundary of meaning.* (Lisa, 47-49)

e. *Maybe I did not actively take part in the class but my mind do a lot. When he (one of the classmates) said the encouragement is the most important thing, I recalled all the things that happened to me done by my parents, my teachers and my friends. Yes, maybe my success like today as a college student was their work.* (Gina, 72-75)

Subtheme 4): Responsibility

Responsibility, another characteristic that stood out for the students, was often talked about in terms of "group presentation" or "facilitation of online discussion." In the first case,

several students reported how they met online in the evening in order to divide the work and to help one another with the presentation. Lisa, for example, reported that "it was impossible" not to take care of Linda whose English was not very good. Barbara noted that as a group "it was our responsibility" to get together "again and again to help them." In the second case, students made meaning of responsibility by describing their experience of facilitating online group discussion. Gina noted that being responsible for the group was "thinking for my class learning." Barbara noted that as a group leader one thing she was held accountable for was "tried my best to keep them active." Examples of Subtheme 4 are as follows.

a. *I feel I should and I had to take care of them because…for example, Linda, if I don't take care of her, I feel this is impossible, I can't do this.* (Lisa, 197-198)

b. *It is our responsibility to meet each other to divide the labor and to decide the order… For example, Manna, if she didn't have a topic, we may be able to help her… So we get together again and again to help them.* (Barbara, 231-238)

c. *If no one thought the passage, we cannot continue the dialogue. If we all thought what the author think, we can continue to communicate with each other. I have to think for my class learning. Maybe it is not for myself but for the group work.* (Gina, 244-247)

d. *When I was the leader. I tried my best to keep them active. Because we continue the dialogue on line at different places, we can't see each other, so we don't know what the other are doing at the same time. If the leader relaxed, the others will do other things, so I tried my best to raise questions. If somebody gave an answer, I would*

immediately ask: can you say more? So I'm always raising questions. And when I

answered a question, I would remember ask back: why did you ask? Because if you

don't ask, I 'm afraid that they may do other things. (Barbara, 138-145)

Subtheme 5*)*:** ***Closeness***

This subtheme describes a feeling of being close to other students. Students reported that they felt close to their classmates during face-to-face and online dialogue. They were aware that being free to express what they really thought about the text through dialogue instead of just finding the "correct answer" from the text allowed them to know the "real thoughts" or "real feelings" of the other persons. Tim noted that different personal interests and after-class readings helped students to shape their views and thoughts in understanding the world. However, the lack of opportunities for interaction in a traditional language class prevented them from sharing their "true feelings and thoughts." Philip revealed that keeping track of what was going on in class by sharing personal stories involved more communication and helped them understand each other better. Barbara noted that the feeling generated by dialogue made her feel like being with her family. Examples of Subthemes 5 are as follows:

a. *In the face-to-face class, actually most of us talked about something out of their heart after thinking about the topic. The words they said are not so correct, maybe so accurate. But I can feel that they say it, they are not reciting a passage or sentences from the text book to answer certain questions. They say it after thinking about it, after considering it based on their knowledge and their personal experience. So I can find, because our ideas vary from person to person. I can find that persons are more*

real… Sometimes, they even reflect their personalities. I feel closer to my classmates.
(Tim, 76-82)

b. *Even though we go to nearly the same school and taught in a certain method from primary school to university. But actually our after-class readings are different and personal interests are different… This knowledge source helps to build up their ideas, point of views.* (Tim, 59-64)

c. *Most of the time, they (classmates) are just likely to pull them (their views) back, because of the, maybe the education patterns, or the teachers actually didn't want them to say something about that, because in the traditional English class, it may mislead the students, not on the right track. (Tim, 14-17)*

d. *The online discussion, I really feel we are like a family. How to say… it is just a feeling, the feeling is different. You can't say it… for example I like to sit with my mother, but there is no why, there is only the true feeling, I just feel comfortable doing that.* (Barbara, 270-275)

e. *Although I could not ask more about what others mentioned during the class, I would go to him /her after class if I was really interested in what he/she had talked about. Thus, we would communicate further after class. And sometimes when we talked about the happy things, especially the humorous stuff, we both laughed. I like that feeling.* (Philip, 67-71)

Theme 2 - Confidence

The theme of confidence was generally described by the students as a feeling of being less worried than they used to be either in posing a question or in responding to one in the context of face-to-face dialogue. Students often talked about their increased confidence by referring to such feelings as "being not afraid of making mistakes" "feeling recognized" or "having a sense of achievement." They spoke extensively about "the easy and relaxed atmosphere" created through dialogue that helped reduce the level of their fear. Results in this theme were defined by four subthemes: 1) respect, 2) tolerance, 3) recognition, and 4) comfort.

Subtheme 1): Respect

Showing respect for others stood out for the students as listening to, or being open to, different perspectives. Lisa reported that listening not only made the speaker feel respected but also invited the listener to acknowledge her presence as a social being. Robert made sense of listening by being patient with anyone when he/she was speaking whether or not he/she was a good speaker. Tim noted that respect for others and their ideas did not mean that we "change totally to believe another person." Three students described their experiences of being "open to other people's view" as being able to "hold your judgment" even if "they said something you didn't agree with" Some examples of this subtheme are as follows:

   a. *If someone speaks and you are not listening, it seems that you took him for granted and you er… you saw him as the air around you. You totally neglected him.* (Lisa, 93-94)

   b. *Allen's speaking is not very good. He talks slowly and has some grammar mistakes. But I think I should be patient with him because his idea may be very helpful and*

useful, and my understanding of the topic is not complete. So when he talked, I kept

patient and listened to his idea. I found, ah, the way he thought about it made sense. I

accepted his idea, which helped me understand the whole passage. (Robert, 117-122)

c. *We interact with each other, maybe we don't change totally to believe another*

   person, but we can find the advantages and good sides of their perspectives. So we

   can learn more from it. (Tim, 224-226)

d. *...if they say something that you don't agree, you just hold your judgment and do not*

   attack their opinion because everyone is viewing a thing from a different perspective.

   I see it from this part while he may see it from the other part. When I raise a question,

   perhaps I have already had my own answer to this question but their answers to this

   question are different from mine. I think this is a very big contribute to my knowledge.

   (Barbara, 85-89)

Steve made meaning of what was not showing respect for other's opinion.

e. *And at the beginning when we typed to communicate with each other. I just ignore*

   what she said. I just kept on typing. And I found that she kept typing too, we didn't

   make any communication, I think it is a little frustrated one. And I think that, after

   that I will think from other's perspective, and if I didn't respect others' opinion, there

   is no base for talking. (Steve, 47-51)

Subtheme 2): Tolerance

The subtheme of tolerance captured both a reduced concern by students about making

grammatical mistakes and an increased willingness to tolerate classmates with poor English. In

the first case, students expressed that it was hard not to make mistakes because "we are using a foreign language." Eric, for example, noted that although "being afraid of making mistakes is a very common phenomenon," the equal opportunity provided by dialogue reduced the level of fear. Tim reported that despite the inappropriate words or misconnections between sentences, what was said by peers was understandable. Tim also reported that engaging in dialogue equipped his classmates with skills to find and correct the mistakes by themselves. In case of tolerating peers with poor English, three students were aware that intolerance of poor speakers could not do anything to make them speak better. On the contrary, being patient would encourage them to "use some simple words" to speak their thoughts out. Specific examples of this subtheme are as follows:

> *a. Being afraid of making mistakes is a very common phenomenon in language learners. It is very common. No matter we are in regular class or CL class. This exists. But at least In CL class, the fear… Although the fear existed, but, for me, the fear was reduced because everyone in CL class had the same opportunity. So that means everyone had the same opportunity to contribute knowledge as well as the same opportunity to make mistakes. So that is the kind of equal atmosphere in CL class. The equal thing reduced the fear.* (Eric, 106-111.)
>
> *b. It is very hard to be logic, every time you speak out the words because the time is limited, we have to just tell about what we want to say, maybe there are some misconnections, I can understand it. But I think through asking each other to help us explain, they themselves will find the mistakes and they will correct them. So, most of the time, I am just tolerant to this.* (Tim, 129-134)

c. Because his language is not very good, he maybe use some simple words, but these simple word may be very, very… familiar to the class. We can understand these words… No matter how slow, how slowly he talked, we just want his idea not the other. (Robert, 96-104)

d. And if I just shout it out back, like be angry with my classmates, it won't do good, because they still may not give a most satisfactory answer. That's, that is the room for us to improve. (Tim, 151-154)

Subtheme 3): Recognition

Recognition was described by some students as a source that yielded happiness, confidence, and a sense of achievement. Several students reported that they were delighted and encouraged when what they said was understood and accepted as "reasonable." They recalled that they felt like "a core (a center)" "a leader" "a problem solver" or "a good facilitator" when what they did for others or the group was recognized as a "contribution." Recognition was also defined by some students as acknowledging other people's contribution, however small, because such recognition is thought to be vicariously inclusive of "oneself." Some examples of this subtheme are as follows:

a. *Well, you know, before class I did plenty of preparation work and then during the class I made my presentation to my classmates, and then they got a clear understanding of it. When what you did is understood and appreciated by others, you can feel the delight coming from the sense of achievement.* (Philip, 69-72)

b. *After this class, I read reflections from my group mates, my classmates. I found most of them mentioned my topic in their reflections and they said they very agreed with*

my idea. So I felt very happy to engage others in a topic and I mention that I felt I am the core, I have the sense of recognition. (Robert, 229-232)

c. *As a group leader, when others raised a question or a point of view, usually I would say 'thank you'' "good point." And their contributions seemed to be recognized because they get praise from me. I never thought that a praising word could play such an important role in discussion. They felt motivated so they said more and when I raised a question they were willing to answer it. Er.. I really feel like a leader not just a student, a normal student.* (Lisa, 68-73)

In her final reflection, Gina described feeling recognized when what she wrote was responded by other students:

d. *I'd like to receive others' responses, the more the better. When somebody responded to me, I knew my voice did count this time and I was recognized. It had become my habit that whenever I logged on the QQ, I would check the e-board or the e-mail immediately to see if anyone wrote response to me. One of my reflections was never read by others, and I felt extremely disappointed, because I felt that I had done something with no meaning at all and all my effort were neglected or ignored by others. Then I suddenly understood that why the westerners are so used to say "thank you for your reading" after receiving a reply of an e-mail or a letter. From this experience of my own I learned that to recognizing others' work really mean a lot to the person who has put effort to it.*

Subtheme 4): Comfort

Some students described experiences of comfort as the creation of an easy and relaxed atmosphere. Several students reported that sitting in a circle instead of in rows enabled them to see and invite each other to talk with ease. They also reported that dialogue online allowed them to type their thoughts at a comfortable pace and thus reduce the nervousness they usually had when speaking spontaneously with others. Some students described "being comfortable" as a feeling of freedom from worry or fear. Bill, for example, noted that the "relaxed and easy atmosphere" created through dialogue freed him of his worry about things such as "pronunciation" or "grammar mistakes." Eric was aware that being able to correct mistakes by himself in an online dialogue helped him to become confident in communication with others. Four more students recalled in their interviews that the easy and relaxed dialogical environment enhanced their confidence about the participation. Examples of Subtheme 4 are as follows:

a. *When Michelle said the understanding of Central Park from another side (across the table), actually, I looked at her, looked in her eyes. She also looked back. That means we agreed with each other. Because of this, I'm confident that some of us must share the same understanding with me so I'm confident to say what I wanted to say.* (Eric, 56-61)

b. *I become to have confidence to speak in front of others... because the atmosphere was quite relax and easy. We didn't need to worry about something, such as our pronouncing and grammar mistakes.* (Bill, 6-18)

c. *When I made some mistakes, very obvious mistakes, I could correct it immediately. That helped me to be more confident in online discussion because I could make fewer mistakes. That was very important to me.* (Eric, 205-207)

Steve wrote in his final reflection that because of the free and relaxed atmosphere, he became brave enough to speak aloud in the public.

d. *I was excited about the forward teaching method, I thought that this time I could perform in the class as the Americans did which I could only saw in the movie. But I was also a little worried about it because of my poor spoken English. With the complicated feeling I participated in the first class, I still remembered that at the very beginning I was a little nervous and I even didn't know how to deal with my hands because I have never sit so closely with each other in class. However…just being open and feeling free to talk about anything related, then I relaxed and I felt I was brave enough to say something…though I still felt a little feared, and our teacher's encouraging nodding lead me to speak, though I, myself could feel that my pronunciation was bad. I felt moved and this encourages me to be brave enough to speak aloud in the public and also urges me to practice my oral English more.*

Theme 3 – Engagement

Another theme that emerged from the student interview transcripts was that of engagement, which was described largely in terms of participating in communicative activities that involved cognitive aspects of language learning such as thinking and reflection. All of the students noted that their participation in dialogue engaged them in in-depth thinking and reflecting that is thought to promote their listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They described their experiences of engagement in meaning making as what they called a "deeper" "better" or a "full-scale" understanding of the text. The "most engaged" learning experiences were represented by the cases in which students successfully engaged the entire group in active

thinking and personal involvement. This theme was composed of the following five subthemes: 1) being engaged, 2) thinking deeply, 3) reflecting, 4) sharing, and 5) commitment.

Subtheme 1): Being Engaged

This subtheme was extensively described in terms of being engaged by others in both face-to-face and online dialogue. "Being engaged" was experienced by several students as arousing the group's interest in actively participating in dialogue either orally or in a written form by posing a question or stating a new perspective. For example, Robert noted that his classmates were truly engaged when what he said about "war" surprised the class and provoked diverse opinions on it even until after class. "Being engaged" involved not only constantly thinking about the topic but also automatically working on alternatives to problem solving, such as reading the paragraph "again and again" or "listening more carefully." Tim, for example, made meaning of his most engaged reading experience by mentioning that he was motivated to read the text again to figure out why the author chose to use the specific title. Some students spoke about "engaged" learning experiences in which they took part in activities that called for their attention to each other and to the process. Three students talked specifically about "being engaged" with the English language by "using" it to communicate with each other rather than simply remembering "the important vocabulary and the phrases." Specific examples of this subtheme are as follows:

a. *I said that war is a way for one country to gain benefits from another country. When I said this, everybody seemed to be surprised. Maybe my opinion was very different from others'. Others, when they talked about war, just think about bloody, misery and dead people. But I took it differently. They asked "What is it?" "Why did you*

say so?" "Can you say more?" And I talked more about it and gave them an example. They were so engaged in this topic… After class, I read reflections from my classmates. I found most of them mentioned the topic in their reflections and they said they agreed with what I said. (Robert, 222-230)

b. *I think this process, at last, to be honest, we still couldn't reach an agreement, we talked about 25 or 30 minutes. But through this process, we read the passage again, not only read certain paragraphs, we have to think about it. "Does the word really mean what the author says or he just wants to ridicule the readers? So I think this helps us to learn, not only to find out what exactly the author wants to do in the passage. So I think at that time, I was really engaged, actually everyone was engaged because we tried to build up to find out the evidence, the details about the certain topic.* (Tim, 177-185)

c. *Maybe a full-scale understanding. And at that time, when Michelle said this, suddenly, I could connect my point and her point. She said that the author wanted make people think of Central Park from a different angle. What I thought was the author wrote this article for New York people. I connected these two points together and I could conclude that the author wrote the article to let New York people to see or to understand Central Park differently. I think that was really a critical point and it was very different from what we thought former. Also, the point that local people always take local beautiful things for granted; this point also came to my mind. And then I remember that at the end of the class I said what I thought but because I*

didn't prepare it very well… It's just a sudden thing from my mind so I didn't

prepare. (Eric, 41-49)

Gina described how she engaged others as well as herself in thinking and responding actively in her weekly reflection. She wrote:

d. *After my presentation, the dialogue began and continued based on the information I provided. During the whole talk I could always find connections between the current topic and my presentation, or at least I was always trying to do so. This helped to make me think and respond actively. At that time I had become the facilitator even without noticing it. It was until at the end of the class that I suddenly noticed that I had contributed a lot by answering others, inviting others, asking back and raising my own questions. I remembered very well that on the way back to the dormitory from the class, I was really delighted and kept talking all the way.*

Subtheme 2): Thinking deeply

"Thinking deeply" was the most engaged collaborative learning experience described by the students. It was characterized by some students as "using their minds" to formulate or answer open-ended questions that helped deepen and widen their knowledge of the text. Other students, however, experienced "thinking deeply" as listening carefully to interpret what was talked about before stating the reasons for what they believed. While several students expressed that face-to-face dialogue made them "think really quick," all of them noted that online dialogue and writing pre/after-class reflections allowed them to "think a lot." Three students reported that the desire to

communicate and the effort to relate other people's story to their own made them "want to think." Some examples of Subtheme 2 are as follows:

a. *It was George, he said something. I could only remember we were talking about something about our learning experience and George said something. Maybe his topic was a little different from what we regularly thought. So at the moment he said what he said. There were at least 5 people asked him "Why did you say so?" And he tried very hard to interpret his statements. After that class, I remember vividly he said that moment he was being asked was really a challenge for him and at the same time he said that at that moment he really thought a lot about what he said and tried very hard to explain.* (Eric,145-153)

b. *… in the class, everybody should… if someone is to get knowledge, they have to use their mind and get their mind working.* (Lisa, 289-290)

c. *In dialogue, we are not chatting, we are not talking nonsense, first we need to listen to what the others talk and then think about why he or she says this kind of things or "Was my idea reasonable or related to this topic or to this speech or something like this?"* (Tim, 385-387)

d. *When I did the pre-class writing, I had to think, think a lot, to think about the paragraph. And this makes me understand the text more deeply than the normal one.* (Steve, 139-141)

e. *I have to think really quick to answer other's questions and when I am answering other's questions, I am thinking about this question and at the same time, because*

after this I have to respond... and I have to think about the question at the same time. And it is challenging. And I find myself actually think…think two things at the same time more quickly than before. (Lisa, 335-340)

f. *On Labor Day, I went home. On the train, I thought the passage was about the mind of the author, because I had different understanding. In "The Soldier's Heart", they all thought it described the soul of the solider. But on the train, I thought the author wanted us to cherish our life and others around us… Collaborative learning made me think more. It made me want to think. We have the desire to communicate, and we need to grasp the details.* (Gina, 228-233)

Subtheme 3): Reflecting

This subtheme concerned student experiences of reflection. These experiences were often described in terms of "writing a reflection**."** Students reported that writing reflectively provided them with opportunities to think purposefully about what they had experienced in class, such as their feelings, thoughts, problems, or concerns. They shared these reflections with others, including me. Students also reported that reflection is a "record of mind," which helped them to know how their "mind improved" and what their "mind experiences were like." Certain students noted that writing a reflection allowed them to "think deeply" of what they wanted to say in class but failed to say it because of lack of time. Two students mentioned that writing a reflection was a "result of group work." Occasionally experiences of reflecting were also described in terms of recalling all that had happened to them in their past learning experiences including "parents love," "teacher's instruction," or "friends' encouragement." The following examples describe the subtheme of reflection as expressed in student responses:

a. *When the class was over I went back to the dormitory and I opened the computer, sit in front of it. Then I would try to recall what happened in the class. Then everything appeared in your mind again. If you cannot recall as much, you cannot write as much… And it seems that you have the class twice—one is the one we have face-to-face and the other is the one you have by yourself… It appeared in your mind again and you pick up some moments that you…*(Barbara, 295-300)

b. *It (reflection) is a record of my mind. So when I recall all the details during the class, I just write down the record. I will know how my mind improved…. During my reflection, I wrote my mind changed, how it changed and what the details were. I would know what my mind experiences are.* (Gina, 259-260)

c. *But after the class when you try to write the reflection, you recall the whole process…en… you are just doing this… You know when you are engaged in class to think about the questions raised by others, you have no time to consider…* (Steve, 148-150)

d. *After-class reflection writing is the deeper thought after we had the class. Before the class, we only had our own ideas but after class we had others' thoughts. We could get them together and found something good and useful. (Bill, 143-146)*

Bill shared his feelings and thoughts in his weekly reflection in terms of his presentation experience. He wrote:

e. *I think I did a bad presentation today even I cannot express myself clearly. Yes, there are some thoughts in my mind but I just cannot express myself clearly in English. I*

am thinking but my oral English is so poor that I cannot do it well. So the way to solve the problem is practicing more. I think every time we should focus on something so that we won't do something unnecessary. We should focus and at least we should find a connection. I learn this because I did a bad presentation.

Bill's reflections allowed me to know his needs and problems in the process of dialogue and helped me reflect on my facilitating. I wrote in my field notes:

   f. *Bill wrote in his reflection that he felt bad because he thought he didn't do a good job. I didn't think so. On the contrary, I thought he did a very good job in engaging others to talk. Why he felt bad? Is it because I asked him to say more and he seemed to have a hard time doing that? I talked to him briefly about that after class. I told him that I asked him to say more not because what he said didn't make sense but because I wanted him to help the class understand better by clarifying his thought. I told him that I didn't want to scare anyone in this class by asking him/her a question. I asked questions because I wanted to challenge him/her to think more deeply and participate more actively. In today's class, I shared with the class what Bill suggested about having a focus and making connections. I "stopped music" twice to ask students to reflect on the process of dialogue instead of frequently asking them to say more by myself.*

Subtheme 4): Sharing

Another aspect of engagement that stood out for the students was sharing. Students reported a strong desire to share with others whatever occurred to them in their efforts to understand better the topic under discussion. They noted that although sometimes the ideas came

up to them so suddenly that they could barely do a good job in expressing themselves, they still wanted to, because they thought it could help others to progress. Several students described their experiences of sharing as steering the dialogue successfully by saying something that others had to think about. One student explicitly mentioned that sharing was a pleasant experience where ideas were exchanged through communication and preparation. Specific examples of Subtheme 4 are as follows:

a. *I remember that I prepared a lot of materials that I was interested in and I had a strong desire to share them with my classmates. During the process of my presentation I tried to repeat the parts that were a little hard to understand until they could catch what I presented when it was necessary*. (Philip, 59-62)

b. *I had such an important argument and I didn't make it clear in the class so I must make it clear in my reflection so that everyone can get my argument which I think was important. I was eager to share this with my classmates. So I wrote it quickly. And I think if it was an essay to be scored; it can have a high score*. (Eric, 245-249)

c. *Every time I read a new article which I was interested in, something could jump into my mind and I would like to share it with my classmates by putting it down. Even though they might have no interest in it, I still would like to do.* (Philip, 138-141)

d. *Actually, I like reading others responses to me. It means what I wrote matters. It is like even after class I was still contributing.* (Barbara, 277-288)

e. *I think the base of collaborative learning is that you have to prepare for the topic before. If you didn't write the pre-class writing, or you didn't read the text, you had*

no preparations, then you went to the class, you would have nothing to say. And you

couldn't understand what other people were talking about…. I think sharing is a very

pleasant experience where you exchange ideas by communicating with other

classmates. (Mollie,7-14)

Subtheme 5): Commitment

In describing Subtheme 5, students noted that they felt like as if they were bound to the group when they were engaged through dialogue in creating an "atmosphere." They used the words such "isolated" or "embarrassed" or "waste of time" to describe what their situation would be like without actively taking part. They became aware of the fact that being able to "raise their curiosity" and "make the group think" was what they really cared about rather than whether or not they could provide an answer. Examples of Subtheme 5 are as follows:

a. *When everybody is thinking, and you have to… if you do not, even if you do not want*
   to think, you have to think actively about this question and if everybody is talking
   very good and you are sitting there…er, keeping silent, you won't feel that…you feel
   you are isolated. So the atmosphere will affect every individual to get engaged in it.
   (Lisa, 290-295)

b. *In this environment, everyone was talking and if I do not talk, it is really*
   embarrassing. (Steve, 58)

c. *When I was in the class, I feel that if I do not talk, if I didn't talk, I feel this class I*
   will be wasted, this class would be waste. (Robert, 58-59)

d. *When I gave the presentation if nobody asked question, I would feel kind of…I failed, I failed to raise their curiosity. If they ask me question, and if I can answer the question, it is good, if I can't answer the question it is also very good, because I make them to think, I help them to think, I have the contribution to the class. If I can't answer the question, that's also ok…* (Barbara, 62-66)

Theme 4 – Change

The theme of change generally played itself out in terms of student experiences of a change in perceiving themselves and in their way of learning English. In the first case, students usually talked about the roles they played in activities on the basis of a dialogue designed to interest, involve and stimulate them. They all reported that they learned not only from the teacher but also from "themselves," "each other," and/or from "their personal learning experiences." These experiences suggested that students started to become aware of "who they are" in a language learning classroom. The second aspect of this theme occurred in many ways. Although all of the students noted that they tended to think and say more and not simply learn by rote, some reported that having freedom to choose and invite, following carefully what others were saying, and being able to see each other engaged them both in constructing knowledge and using the language. This feeling suggested that they became aware of the fact that the complexity of language learning, as one student put it, extends itself far beyond "just copy and paste." The theme of change consists of two subthemes: 1) difference, 2) adjustment.

Subtheme 1): Difference

Of all of the subthemes, this one was most concerned with the student's experiences of perceiving and understanding the class. Within this subtheme, students talked a great deal about

the differences between the current class and traditional class in terms of "who is in charge" and "how English is learned." Although only two students explicitly mentioned that in the current class both teacher and the student were in charge, many did talk about their "freedom," which was unlikely in a traditional class. Whereas several students noted that in the current class they "focused more on thoughts than words and phrases," some did report that they passively "received the meaning that the teacher gave" in a traditional class. In general, students experienced the current class as being "unpredictable" "having to do a lot of things by themselves" and/or "taking part in activities." Six[3] students, however, mentioned "wanting to sleep," "unable to see each other," or "feeling uneasy to ask a question" in a traditional class. Examples of this subtheme are as follows:

a. *The formal courses style, and we just…we were just seated in the classroom and teacher in front of us. She kept talking and talking, and we just remember. In this course, we just sit around a table like a discussion or common talk. So I feel free to talk and eager to state my ideas and my views and opinions. In this class, I talked more than before and…and the…and in this class I was aroused to think, to think more about the text, not just to remember what the teacher told me.* (Robert, 3-8)

b. *It (the class) is very different from what we always had. And …in the class…in the class, I think it is the invitation part. For example, when I finished my speaking I will invite others or others will invite me. I think this gave me a very different feeling. Because in the traditional class it is always the teacher who calls each other's name,*

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[3] I used the number such as "six" or "two" in some places in this chapter to emphasize either there were relatively "more" or "fewer" participants.

she raises a question and asks you answer this one and you answer this one. But in this class we students can ask each other. (Barbara, 3-8)

c. *But in CL class, things are different because uh….the questions are mostly unexpected. We may not give a quick answer or we tend to say more to illustrate our ideas. So I can see the process of thinking from my classmates.* (Tim, 90-93)

d. *If I had questions in my previous class, there were so many students in the classroom, and the teacher just gave you brief answers. If you didn't know, you couldn't raise it again, because that would interrupt the teacher's process in the teaching…Because you didn't speak, and you didn't move, we could not see the blackboard. She just taught. It's very likely that we get sleepy. And we missed very important things in class. In this class, you have to follow what others are saying. And you give your response. Because your thought is alive, you wouldn't get sleepy.* (Mollie, 304-310)

e. *We got together to talk the passage. We could express our own thoughts about what we learned from the passage. In the past we just listened to our teachers and we should remember the vocabulary and phrases. We received the meaning that the teachers gave. These things just come from our teachers but not by us.* (Bill, 57-60)

f. *We have a lot to do by ourselves. Really a lot to do. In the traditional class, the teacher tells us the usage of this and that and we just listen and er… But in this, we have to, because everyone is the source of knowledge, we have to research, do some research and have to do it ourselves.* (Lisa, 359-363)

Subtheme 2): Adjustment

The subtheme of adjustment captured student feelings about their experiences of CL as they lived with it through a back and forth movement from "curious about it, to not used to it, to getting adjusted to it, to being excited about it." Although only one student explicitly mentioned his complicated journey of transition in his interview, many did talk about curiosity, frustration, worry, and/or excitement in terms of CL, suggesting that adjustment was experienced by many students relating both to issues of teaching and learning and to those of knowledge about language. Curiosity was described by some students as "wanting to know what collaborative learning is like." Frustration was reported by several students as "not knowing where dialogue leads them without learning vocabulary and grammar" Worry captured student concerns about the words they did not know and the exams which were viewed as providing a demonstration of mastery or incompetence. Excitement concerned students' experiences of being excited by a sudden realization that "it is nice to respond to others," "language learning is not just copy and paste," or "using language makes words easier to remember." Specific examples of Subtheme 2 are as follows:

a. *I have learned English for so many years and I have been used to the old way to learn English for such a long time. But CL was very fresh to me. In order to well use CL to learn English, I had to find out a new way. However, I failed to do that. In previous classes, I usually did the previewing work by reciting the vocabularies, reading the articles of the context book in the morning so that I could coordinate with the teacher in class. Now CL came to me and unfortunately I did not clearly know what to do before and after class. Although I had some homework to deal with, such as the pre-class writings and the reflections, I had no idea about what else to do besides those. I*

failed to find an appropriate way to deal with CL, thus, I always said that I failed to adjust myself to CL. (Philip,166-176)

b. *At first, I felt quite curious about CL when it came to me. What was it like? What would we be required to do? I expected to start my experience of it. Gradually, I felt more and more unfruitful. Near the end, however, I fortunately changed my mind. Well, I was eager to be engaged in the class again as I did in the first class, and I realized that it was nice to respond to others' questions.* (Philip, 218-222)

c. *In the traditional class everything is arranged carefully by the teacher. She makes the class continue exactly as what she arranged. She raises questions and tells what important thing is. But in this class the teacher cannot control as much.* (Barbara, 18-21)

d. *It (the class) is not learning language, language means you should learn and grasp the grammar. This is maybe the traditional way of learning language. But a tool means you use this language to communicate to let others know what you thought. It is a way of using the language… So I think it is not learning language, it is a tool.* (Gina,215-218)

e. *Some of the words in the text I still do not know. And some of the words are a barrel to my understanding of the passage. And I have to look it up and sometimes I have to refer to the reference book to see what the sentence really means. Sometimes the organization of the sentence is difficult to understand.* (Lisa, 245-248)

f. *However, the thing that most of Chinese students care about is the examination, which is quite stressful to us. What we did in CL classes brought no direct benefits to our examination.* (Philip, 235-238)

g. *Before the CL, I do not know what the comprehensive learning (Intensive Reading English class) is about. Maybe I thought it is just about the grammar and phrases and the words how we used it. But I do not know that it actually has any meaning. During the CL, I got to know that this totally let us learn the author's thoughts, the meaning of the text. I think, this is actually the college education should have. It is not about the grammar because we have learned is enough. And the words we can learn it by ourselves. But the idea is really we cannot have.* (Gina, 235-241)

h. *I got to know many vocabularies. And I memorized them very naturally, because I used them a lot. And during the online discussion, we could not communicate face to face. There might be some misunderstanding. Sometimes, we write these words, we are likely to misunderstand the word. So the typist explained it. Finally we got the true meaning of that word. And that was very impressive for us, so we can remember it for a long time.* (Mollie, 157-162)

My field notes reflected how students were struggling with the new way of learning and how they experienced learning by adjusting. In one of my field notes I wrote:

i. *Compared with our previous meetings, I found today's class was quiet. I was wondering why. Maybe because of the hot temperature? Students looked tired. One student also noticed the difference. She mentioned in her reflection she seemed to be*

influenced by the slow class atmosphere and became not as active. She wrote that she

had a hard time writing a reflection because she didn't know what to write, how, and

what I was looking for. I appreciated that she told me about her true feelings and

thoughts. I agreed with her that everybody in this class including me experienced a

hard time with CL. I asked her how she thought we could do to keep our dialogue

moving as actively as we did in the first three weeks. I think I should bring this

question to class on our Thursday meeting.

Interaction of Themes

As I was reading through the various excerpts, I noticed that more than a single theme often appears in a single response. For example, in the very first excerpt presenting Theme 1, the student was aware not only of freedom (Theme 1) but also of its role in bringing about difference (Theme 4). The second excerpt not only presented the theme of freedom but also that of engagement (Theme 3). In fact, when I returned to the very first excerpt used to show how thematic analysis works, I saw without much difficulty that it concerned many (if not all) of the themes presented under each of the individual themes. The general conclusion seems to be that most (if not all) descriptions deal with more than a single theme.

If this is the case, then a more complex structure seems to be needed to represent how themes are interrelated to one another. Although not every theme is interconnected with every other theme in each interview protocol, what became apparent to me from reading all of the protocols is that for some students every theme did connect with every other theme in a clear way. This indicated that themes generated from student experience with dialogue define a pattern

in which each individual theme emphasizes a particularly salient aspect. For this reason, I

developed the Figure shown below to capture the overall thematic structure characterizing
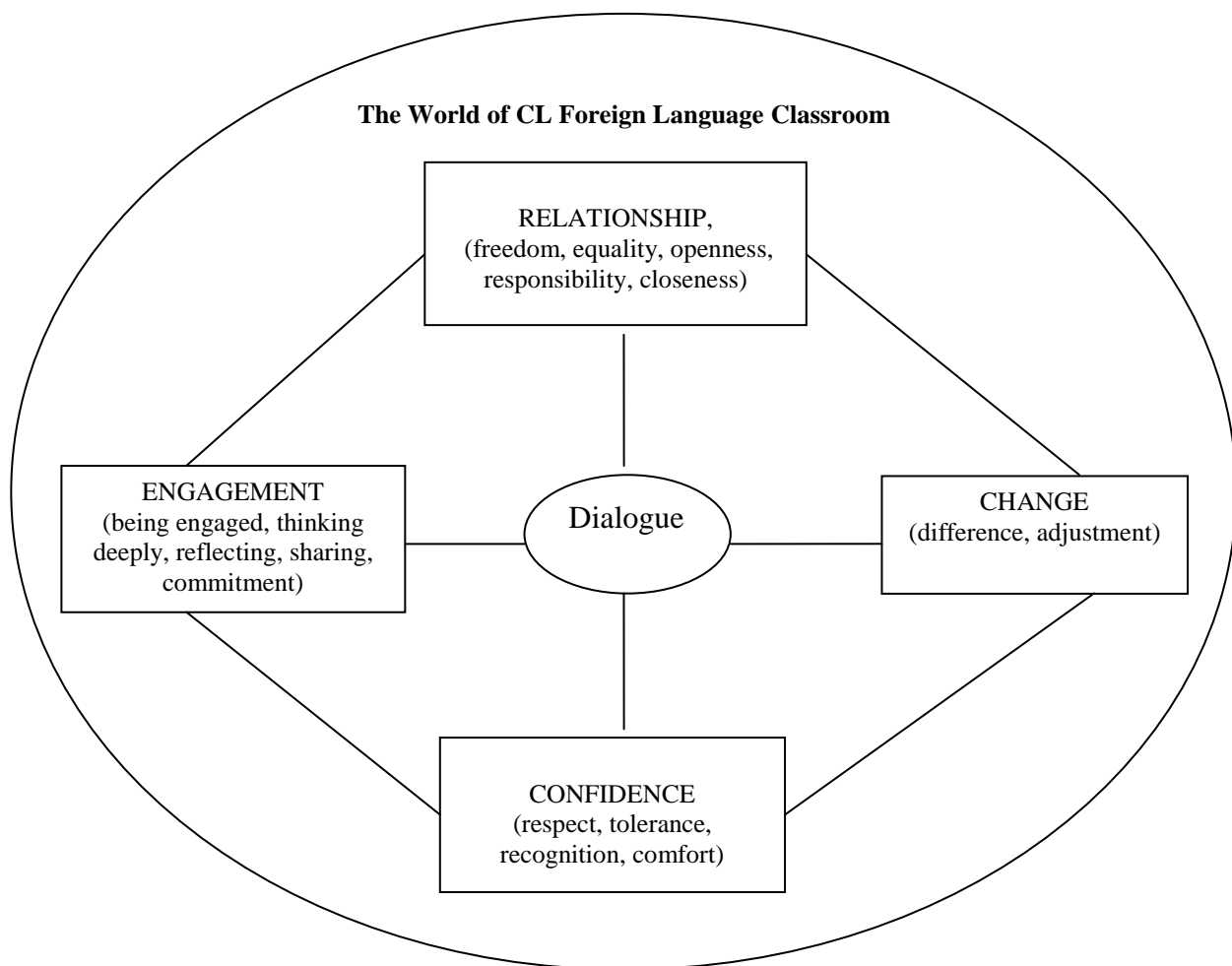
present results:

Figure 1. Pattern of Interconnections among Themes Describing Students' Experiences of Dialogue in an IRE Classroom

As illustrated from Figure 1, each of the individual themes has been placed at one corner

of the diamond, and lines drawn to connect the corners with one another. Themes arranged this

way suggest that what students reported as standing out for them is a patterned event in which all, or some, themes co-occur in specific experiences. Although the total structure is defined by four distinct but interrelated themes, some experiences may involve only one theme or, more usually, two, three or four themes at the same time. So, for example, the experience of respect for other students was found to involve themes of relationship and engagement; being open to different perspectives, those of change and confidence; and so forth.

The large circle in Figure 1 represents the research setting -- a CL foreign language learning classroom. The small circle in the middle indicates the pedagogy - dialogue as inquiry. The lines drawn to link dialogue to individual themes demonstrate that interconnections between and among themes are produced by and through dialogue. A group of subthemes have been placed under the heading in each of the four rectangles to suggest that while the primary themes define the overall thematic structure, certain experiences could be characterized by a smaller subset of themes, which I called subthemes.

Subthemes are interconnected not only with primary themes but also, though sometimes very subtly, with one another. For example, the important word that stood out for students in connection with the first set of subthemes was *relationship*; the important word used in connection with the second set was *confidence*. As seems clear, the first set of subthemes defines a largely interpersonal experience, whereas the second defines a more social and emotional experience. Just as it is possible to focus on a single theme and have the remaining themes stay away from notice, so too it is possible to be aware of a single subtheme, unless we always keep it in mind that each subtheme or theme is only one aspect of some larger pattern defined by

interconnections among all the themes. In this study, the total figure represents students'

experiences of CL; no single theme or subtheme can be fully understood alone.

Chapter Five

Discussion

In Chapter Two, I theorized that creating a dialogical environment that incorporates social, affective and pedagogical dimensions of support can help promote student engagement in dialogue. I also theorized that dialogue is related to language teaching and learning in terms of social interaction and personal reflection. Two assumptions underlying this theory were: 1) By learning through interaction and reflection, students are enabled to develop in-depth thinking and decision making skills for use in different learning situations; and 2) The reshaped relationships, as a result of interaction, between student and teacher, student and student, student and subject matter, can bring about a change in the way of looking at learning and at oneself as a learner. I also theorized that by engaging students in creating a supportive dialogical environment, I could help them to become aware of what happened to their way of looking at learning and at themselves as learners when their roles and interpersonal relationships changed. My practical theory was based on Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) dialogical theory, Garrison et al.'s (2000) description of Community of Inquiry, and Peters and Armstrong's theory of collaborative learning (1998). I used dialogue as inquiry in my approach to teaching. The major question that guided my research was: *How do sophomore English students experience creating a supportive dialogical environment in an IRE class?* This is followed by Chapter Three, a description of my research design and procedures. In Chapter Four, I presented results deriving from a phenomenological analysis of student interviews, student final reflections, and my field notes. In this chapter, I discuss these results in terms of my practical theory and related literature.

Thomas and Pollio (2002) pointed out that there are two ways of talking about themes: in terms of participant experiences and in terms of reflections on participant experience. The first method deals with what the participants say about their experiences. The second method is based on reflection: What does this mean to me when I think about the process and what does this mean for my research? I will discuss the results in terms of my reflections on four themes which, taken together, describe the essence of this study. The four themes are: relationship, confidence, engagement, and change.

Relationship

Students acknowledged the essential role dialogue played in improving their interpersonal relationship as they engaged in creating a language learning community. Tim's statement was especially powerful in expressing how the "true feelings" and "true thoughts" of his classmates about their understandings of a text made him feel closer to them. He talked about how the current tendency of English learning to focus on vocabulary and grammar distracts students from thinking about meaning of the learning content. He was keenly aware that following rigidly what the teacher or the reference book said about the meaning of sentences restricted the student from expressing his/her "true ideas" about a text and about him/herself as a person.

Philip and Barbara's descriptions of their improved relationship with their classmates suggests that personal stories unfolded in the process of dialogue matter greatly to them in creating a collaborative learning community that is inherently interpersonal. According to Philip, shared emotions generated from personal stories increased his interest in communication and opened the possibility for strengthening interpersonal relationships and group cohesion.

Barbara's description of "being with my family" offered a lively image of a safe and comfortable learning community where she, as a member, felt cared for, respected, and accepted as if she were "sitting with her mother." If being with family is universally considered as a safe and comfortable situation, then Barbara's metaphor would seem to define the essence of the relationships constructed by the community.

Students also acknowledged that dialogue enabled them to make connections in meaning making between themselves and other students, themselves and the learning content, and past and present learning experiences. Mollie's report about her "thinking from other's perspective" indicated how she was able to reach a new understanding by connecting what she interpreted with what was said about the text. Gina's experience of how engaging in dialogue helped her to reflect on what her parents, friends, and teachers did for her in her growing up revealed that engaging in the social construction of knowledge necessarily involves students in connecting what they immediately encounter with what they experience elsewhere (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Stahl & Sanusi, 2001; Wenger, 1998). These consciously and unconsciously built connections tend to create additional opportunities for them to engage with the language and their relationship to the community.

In a study of classroom narratives of teaching and learning, Gray (2008) found that a safe and comfortable learning environment provided students with a non-judgmental way to explore dialogically what they thought about composition writing. She observed that engaging students in unfolding their own stories often would lead the class into constructing a more meaningful and inclusive metanarrative. She further concluded that facilitating students to construct a

metanarrative through dialogue in a composition class would generate what Lave and Wenger (1991) called a "community of practice."

Similar experiences in a group of graduate students were discussed by Dillivan (2004) in his study of knowledge construction in higher education. He found that a shift from a focus on how students understood what was taught to how they understood one another through dialogue made them feel connected to the group. He also found that feeling "good, contented, and productive" due to personal involvement in dialogue was an important part of the students' experiences of group knowledge construction. He concluded that how individual learners construct knowledge in a group learning situation often depends on how they relate to other members and the group as a whole.

Though deriving from different learning settings, the results of studies by Gray and Dillivan are consistent with what I found in my study. *What can be generally concluded from this finding is that the student experiences of creating relationships served also to address how they built a learning community.* Many researchers approach community building by emphasizing the importance of developing and sustaining relationship (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Bruffee, 1999; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Stahl & Sanusi, 2001; Peters & Armstrong, 1998; Gray, 2008; Roberts, 2005). These researchers agree that being able to establish relationships, develop a sense of community, and work collaboratively leads to a more successful learning experience for all involved.

Wenger (1998) described a "community of practice" as a group of people who share a common interest and a desire to learn from and contribute to the community by sharing a variety of their experiences. The thrust of community building, according to Wenger, is to emphasize the

construction and further development of relationships in which the group of learners gains knowledge through practice and participation. Wenger defined learning as participation in community building. In my study, Lisa's experience of "breaking the boundary of meaning," Tim's "listening to others to find similarities and differences," and Barbara's "trying my best to keep them active" all suggest that students were building a learning community by participating in practices of questioning, interpreting from different perspectives, sharing, facilitating, reflecting, clarifying, agreeing/disagreeing, dividing tasks, and pooling results. None of these practices would likely have taken place if individual learners worked alone (Stahl, 2000; Garrison, et al., 2000; Peters & Armstrong, 1998; Fischer & Granoo, 1995).

In addressing the part dialogue plays in classroom community building, Rovai (2002), Garrison, et al., (2000) and Gribbs (1995) suggest that dialogue taking place within a context of an increased affective support has the potential to build and sustain relationships among learners and thus promote a strong sense of community. The results of my study revealed that what students do to and for each other as they engaged in dialogue, such as showing respect for one another, recognizing other's contribution, and thinking with and for the group, was largely self-generated, socially and emotionally driven, and should result in stronger feelings of community (Rovai, 2002; Gribbs, 1995; Garrison, et al., 2000).

As students talked about relationships, what frequently came to students' awareness were the relevant elements of dialogue such as freedom, equality, and openness, which seem to be necessary conditions for community building. In my study, students reported that "they were free to say what they want to say," "they were given an equal opportunity to raise and answer one another's questions," and "they paid more attention to ideas and making connections than

seeking a correct answer from the text." They also reported experiencing that "there is more than one correct answer," "equal things reduce fear," and "we have to take care of what was happening in the dialogue." *These experiences led to a conclusion that a learning community does not "impose" itself on students; it "develops through and from them." (Isaacs, 1999, p. 246)*

Students made connections between dialogue and freedom, equality, openness, and responsibility when they reflected on their collaborative learning experiences. They made these connections because what they experienced in this class was something they had never experienced before (Peters & Armstrong, 1998) and something that broke the flow of their ordinary but taken-for-granted way of language learning. If the discontinuity that the students experienced could create any possibility to express their "real thoughts" without being "denied," if something they had never experienced before could yield a feeling of being "a contributor," and if the discontinuity could make them aware of "limits" to understanding, then there would be a great many opportunities for them to construct knowledge about and through language. The primary purpose of a classroom community, according to Rovai (2001, 2002), is to promote learning. In my study, when dialogue engaged students in building a learning community, it created conditions for them to make meaning and develop language skills (Long, 1996; Oxford, 1998; Norton Peirce, 1995).

When students described their experiences of engaging in dialogue, they found that their interpretations of a text sometimes were very different from one another, their fear about making grammatical mistakes or disrupting the class were less, their attitudes to less advanced speakers changed, and they played a different role when posing a question than answering one. The

pattern of these experiences suggests that only when students engage with themselves, others, and the events occurring in their surroundings, are they likely to become aware of these differences (Shotter, 1994; Peters, 2008; Isaacs, 1999). In my study, the freedom and equality provided by and through dialogue not only enabled students to notice differences but also required them to make simultaneous connections that served to hold them together in their relationships to me, the group, themselves, and the community.

Confidence

Although only a few students explicitly reported that they became confident in communication with others, many other students did acknowledge that they were less afraid of making grammatical mistakes while speaking. Eric, for example, expressed his experience of reduced fear in an analytical way when he reported that being afraid of making grammatical mistakes was a common phenomenon in either a traditional or CL class. He also noted that the "equal things (equal opportunity to speak, to make mistakes, etc.) in a CL class reduced fear." Robert reported a similar feeling but in a more personal way: he reported that he "used to be very shy but not any longer" because the easy and relaxed atmosphere generated by dialogue not only provided a feeling of safety but also inspired a desire to share. Bill experienced becoming confident in speaking English because he "did not have to worry about other things such as grammar." The experiences of these students seem to suggest that the level of confidence for most students, if not all, tended to increase.

It is true that being less afraid does not necessarily mean that students developed confidence in themselves, especially in the context of my study where they only had eight weeks to engage in dialogue. Their reports of "reduced fear", however, led me to consider the

possibility that they, in fact, were taking a step towards being confident. In addition, their experiences of "a strong desire to share" suggested that the dialogical setting was relatively comfortable, tolerant, and respectful. Bill's description of "not having to worry about other things," however, made me reflect on: What are the "other things?" The answer seems to be what almost everyone in a foreign language classroom has ever experienced when they talk about worry: speaking poorly, using a wrong word, giving an incorrect response, breaking the flow of the teacher's lecture, etc.

If Bill's experience of having confidence in speaking was due to "not worrying about other things," then the *conclusion would seem to be that his assurance of himself and English language abilities developed along with the creation of what Peters and Armstrong (1998) called a dialogical space.* These authors defined such a space as a physically and psychologically comfortable learning environment, where participants engage in jointly constructing knowledge through dialogue. A dialogical space builds relationships and contexts for dialogue to move beyond the immediate understanding. Peters and Armstrong emphasized that trust and respect are two central elements in the practice of dialogue and that trust is built when the ideas, thoughts, and feelings of the members are recognized and shared by other members of the group.

Isaacs (1999) used the metaphor of a "container" to describe a dialogical space (p.241). By this he meant to suggest a setting in which shared meaning, energy, and possibility arises from a group of people who dialogue. He also pointed out that a dialogical space is like a "vessel" that holds all who are involved in creating and sustaining it continuously (p. 243). According to Isaacs, four practices are needed for being able to create a dialogical space: listening, respecting, suspending and voicing. While listening provides participants with

additional ways to understand their world, respecting invites them to "see what others say or do as legitimate" (p.111). Suspending, considered as a practice of withholding one's judgment, enables participants to step back from their taken-for-granted ways of thinking. Voicing, as one of the most challenging aspects of dialogue, requires participants to tell what is true to them despite the influences of others they might have and to know how to listen before they learn to ask a simple question.

Research on foreign language teaching and learning shows that a classroom environment where interaction is encouraged promotes student willingness to communicate with others and fosters a sense of confidence (Oxford, 1997; McCroskey, 1984; MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, & Conrod, 2001; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002; Young, 1991). Willingness to communicate with others is defined as student's intention to interact with others in the target language, when free to do so (Oxford, 1997). In their studies, Oxford (1997), Young (1990), Gardner (1985), MacIntyre and Charos (1996) all found that willingness to communicate with others was related to a feeling of comfort, high self-esteem, low anxiety, and perceived competence. Young (1991) suggested that creating a low-anxiety classroom environment through practices, activities, and modeling can help increase student willingness to communicate with others and raise their level of confidence.

Researchers in both collaborative learning and foreign language teaching and learning emphasize the important role that a comfortable learning environment plays in reducing students' fear, worry, and anxiety in communicating with others. Collaborative researchers, however, are more focused on how teachers engage students in collaboratively creating a dialogical environment where learning takes place on the basis of interpersonal interaction, whereas

researchers of foreign language teaching and learning seem to stress how teachers help students to deal with anxiety-provoking situations more effectively, thereby enabling teaching and learning to continue in a more realistic way. *A review of the related literature and of the various excerpts of the students led me to conclude that confidence is a primary theme that is strongly interconnected with the four subthemes of respect, tolerance, recognition, and comfort that define the overall theme of confidence*. I describe the four subthemes and how they relate to the theme of confidence in the following sections.

When students described their experiences of respecting or being respected by others, they frequently mentioned listening. They reported how showing respect for others meant listening carefully to what they were saying. Lisa, for example, was aware that listening made both the speaker and the listener feel respected. As a speaker, the person would feel respected because he/she had an audience when speaking. As a listener, the person would feel respected when he/she became a speaker because of the respect shown to the previous speaker. Robert's experience of listening captured a different aspect of respecting. He noted that listening was usually applied to listen to the teacher but not the student in a traditional class; however, by being "patient with Allen," he learned that although "Allen spoke slowly and made some grammatical mistakes, his ideas may be very helpful and useful." Tim's description of listening-as-respecting revealed that to show respect for others meant that he did not have to "change totally to believe another person," although he has to listen carefully in order to find "good sides of their perspectives."

Barbara described how she was able to withhold her judgment while the other was speaking. She noted that even if she did not agree with the other person, she continued to listen so that she could make the speaker feel respected on the one hand and allow her to think critically on the other. Barbara's experience of showing respect for others by listening is consistent with what Isaacs (1999) wrote about the practice of "suspending" in terms of creating a dialogical space. According to Isaacs, "suspending" is the hardest of the four practices to use. When students became aware of withholding judgment, it seems to me that dialogue sheds light on how they learned to "make sense" in a different way by recognizing that key to dialogue is being able to listen (Isaacs, 1999). In my study, dialogue as inquiry allowed students not only to listen to others but also to themselves and to their own reactions to classroom experiences. *When comfortably facing a respectful audience, they were more likely to become confident enough to share more of their thoughts.*

Tolerance, in terms of dialogue, is related to respect because "you have to do some deliberate work to create settings inside yourself and with others – where it is possible to listen" (Isaacs, 1999, p. 84). In my study, being tolerant of grammatical mistakes or broken sentences was not something that students wanted to do but something they had to do, because they understood that making mistakes is unavoidable in an English learning class and that losing patience when listening to a poor speaker does not and cannot help a person to speak better. Students may not tolerate a poor speaker if they think listening to her/him is simply "a waste of time." When Eric was acutely aware that making mistakes was a common phenomenon in an English learning class, he seemed to be ready for taking risks in "speaking out." Similarly, Tim reported that he had to tolerate the words or structures that were misused by his classmates

because he believed that "they can find and correct mistakes by themselves." This seemed to imply that the dialogical space he and his fellow students were creating has the potential to make them better language users because dialogue constantly involves them in listening and speaking. Moreover, Robert's experience of being patient with a poor speaker served as an example to show that when feeling comfortable, even less advanced speakers wanted to share more by choosing easier words or structures. In the examples of Eric, Tim and Robert, being patient suggested that demonstrating a certain degree of tolerance not only reduced students' fear of "looking dumb," it also increased their self motivation to participate in a more realistic way (Price, 1991; Young, 1990; Koch & Terrell, 1991).

Students acknowledged that recognition, by others, of their contribution to the group brought happiness, satisfaction, and a sense of pride that, in turn, increased their willingness to participate in dialogue. They also acknowledged that their confidence with English was boosted when what they said or did for the group was understood or appreciated. Philip, for example, described how he felt recognized when almost everyone in his class told him that he did a very good job in co-facilitating others' learning. Barbara also described how the questions she posted on the forum raised the curiosity of other students and how what they responded made her feel she was contributing to the class. Moreover, Lisa described how her "smiling and nodding" or "saying thanks" to her fellow students in group discussions made them feel recognized and motivated to ask more questions. *The pattern of these experiences led me to conclude that engaging students in creating a comfortable and respectful dialogical space helped them experience a sense of recognition.* Similar aspects of the experiences of foreign language learners were discussed by Oxford (1997), Young (1990), MacIntyre and Charos (1996), Leary

(1982).These authors contend that a perceived positive attitude toward students, particularly in regard to their language competence, promotes confidence in communication, whereas a perceived negative reaction, either verbal or nonverbal, discourages them from participating.

Students who experienced comfort when they engaged in dialogue focused their descriptions on two aspects: a physically comfortable place and a psychologically relaxed atmosphere. In terms of the first aspect, they emphasized the fact that sitting in a circle was indeed necessary for creating a dialogical space. They also acknowledged that being able to see one another allowed them to take care of those staying quiet, those wanting to say something but lacking confidence, and those making non-verbal reactions. They also noted that online dialogue, where they could not see one another, minimized their fear of making grammatical mistakes. In terms of the second aspect, students related their sense of comfort to other subthemes such as freedom and equality. They also noted that "being able to say what they wanted to say" and believing that "there was no right or wrong answer" helped produce an easier and more relaxed dialogical atmosphere. *These comments shared by students led me to conclude that engaging students in creating a dialogical space where their self-confidence with English could be developed would reinforce their level of comfort.*

Engagement

Students acknowledged that dialogue played a strong role in engaging them in activities, practices, and uses of the English language. They described experiences of engagement in terms of both face-to-face and online dialogue as well as in terms of activities they attended in and out of class. Students noted that engaging in face-to-face dialogue enabled them to co-construct

meaning of a text by drawing on interpretations from different perspectives. They reported that dialogue was like "brainstorming" which provided them with opportunities to share their ideas freely and spontaneously. They also reported that although their participation did not necessarily add anything important to what other students previously said, it did make a difference in understanding of a text because of the verbal exchanges involved in dialogue. Robert's experience of successfully engaging others in understanding the effect of World War II on soldiers was but one instance among many where they were given greater opportunity to share their knowledge. In their study of how a group of students of diverse origins experienced co-construction of knowledge when they were situated in social interactions, Dagenais, Walsh, Armand and Maraillet (2008) found that valuing and sharing knowledge from different language perspectives enabled students to "tap into a collective language repertoire so that this pooled resource became available to all in the joint classroom activity" (p.147).

In terms of co-constructing an understanding of some text, students in my study also were aware that being engaged in asking and answering one another's questions instead of "reciting sentences from the text" brought depth to their understanding. Examples of this process include Tim's experience of being engaged in discovering why the author chose to use the specific title for the text, Eric's description of his effort in connecting what he thought with what Michelle said about *Central Park*, and Philip's experience of "pushing the dialogue forward" by raising questions to "keep them thinking." The pattern of these experiences suggests that when students engaged in co-constructing meaning through dialogue, they were able to challenge and support each other's thinking and extend an individual's as well as the group's learning because each statement or question they made in the process was built on the ideas and thoughts of other

students. This was particularly noteworthy in an English learning classroom where traditionally, students rarely ask questions in class and their reading comprehension is often limited to finding answers from the text.

Students realized that engaging in dialogue in the target language was not simply for practice but also for communication. Gina's statement was especially powerful when she noted that the current class "has meaning in it." She acknowledged that she had no idea what it meant to make meaning in an English class before and what she knew about learning English was to master its grammar and vocabulary. She spoke extensively about how the current class with its focus on meaning making helped her become aware of the fact that she was "using the language to let others know what she thought about." Tim's statement was equally powerful when he reported that he was engaged in a "real" conversation because he "used words and phrases in a real communication context, not a copy and paste." The pattern of these experiences led me to conclude that *engaging students in dialogue -- a pedagogical approach that focused on how we, as Shotter (1997) pointed out, co-construct ways of relating ourselves with one another by integrating our talk with other activities between us -- influenced how students thought and discussed their ways of English learning and English knowledge.*

For most students, engaging in CL meant engaging in learning activities that supported and sustained dialogue. For example, Mollie reported that engaging in writing a pre-class reflection prepared her for "concentrating on what others were saying in class." Barbara noted that she was able to continue dialogue because reflecting on what was happening in class enabled her to write about dialogue even after class. Philip described his most engaged learning

experience as "preparing a lot of materials" before class in order to "share them" with his classmates because he believed the materials "he was interested in" could also arouse interest in other students. The pattern of these experiences resonates with the experiences of students discussed by Swain, Brooks, and Tocalli-Beller (2002) in their review article dealing with how peer-peer dialogue affects SL/FL learning. These authors suggest that dialogue can and does occur when students are involved in writing, reading, speaking and listening activities and that engaging students in dialogue promotes language learning.

Students specifically mentioned that writing reflections as an after-class learning activity improved their writing skills. They acknowledged that attending to what was going on in class made their reflection writing much easier because they had "something to say." They also acknowledged that reflecting on events that happened in class, especially those that stood out for them and motivated them to write. Some students reported that writing a reflection served as a forum in which they could launch a dialogue after class so that they could understand better what they were not sure about in class. Almost all of the students noted that reflecting on and writing about what was happening to them as they engaged in dialogue stimulated their thinking. The finding of this study and a similar finding of my previous study conducted in 2004 support what Swain and Lapkin (1998, 2001) and Spielman Davidson (2000) found in their studies of SL learners engaged in collaborative writing. These authors claim that collaborative writing warrants attention because dialogue that emerges in the writing process involves language learning. According to them, attending to the talk generated in co-construction of a piece of writing allowed for students to know better what they are going to write about in terms of both content and language.

In talking about engaged experiences of CL, what students in my study emphasized most was the impact of dialogue on their way of thinking. They noted that posing and answering questions stimulated their thinking. They reported that they had to think very "quickly" when responding to the questions of other students. They also reported that focusing on one topic at a time by building ideas upon one another deepened their thinking. They were also aware that being invited to say more challenged them to think a lot. They consistently mentioned that they tended to think on their own because their "job" in class was not simply to find a correct answer from the text. The pattern of these experiences led me to conclude that *engaging students in dialogue promotes in-depth thinking. In the process of dialogue, students work together to solve problems and co-construct knowledge about language that encourages rigor in their thinking and communicating.* This finding also supports what I found in my previous study and what Swain, Brooks, and Tocalli-Beller's (2002) found in the studies they reviewed that dialogue mediates SL/FL learning. They concluded that language can be used both as a cognitive tool to deal with meaning making and as a tool for communicating with others. They also concluded that engaging SL/FL learners in dialogue enhances their language performance and language development because the sources of cognitive functions are often social in nature.

Shotter (1997) also described "thinking" as "not so private; nor so inner" because it is rooted in our daily experiences (p.12). According to Shotter, our thoughts are not first organized at the center of our minds. Rather, they take shape only when they are related to interactions with another person(s), and these become organized during communication with others. Although both Swain et al. (2002) and Shotter (1997) discussed how dialogue is linked to thinking and thoughts, they have different foci. Swain et al. emphasized the role of dialogue in scaffolding

SL/FL learners' cognition, whereas Shotter's description tended to focus on how dialogue influences relationships with others in which our thinking and thoughts develop. These authors, however, agreed that dialogue may help a group to reach new levels of thinking and communicating primarily because dialogue constitutes both language and thought. When a group is engaged in dialogue, what is constructed by the group cannot be solely attributed to the mental processes of any one individual learner; rather, construction is enabled by multiple voices within the group (Shotter, 1995, 1997).

Students in my study made meaning of engagement by sharing ideas, thoughts, information, and materials with others. They felt that being able to share their personal understandings about the topic they were jointly investigating offered an opportunity to communicate with and to contribute to one another. For example, Robert's experience of "successfully solving problems by sharing his ideas and thoughts," Barbara's enjoying "reading other students' responses" to her reflection, and Mollie's "pleasant experience of exchanging ideas by communicating with others" all indicated that sharing personal knowledge with others and the group made them feel engaged and motivated. This is particularly noteworthy in a language learning classroom because traditionally, sharing knowledge takes place primarily between teacher and students. Moreover, it is almost always the teacher who shares and the students receive what is shared (Richard-Amato (2003). When students in my study were motivated to share their understanding with one another, they enhanced their engagement in a way that allowed both themselves and others to learn.

Some students perceived engagement through dialogue as a way of making a commitment to the group. Students noted that in a process of creating what they called an "active atmosphere," they linked themselves to the group. Lisa, for example, reported how staying quiet while others were speaking made her feel isolated. Steve expressed a similar experience when he said "if I did not talk, it is really embarrassing." Robert also described that it was a waste of his time if he did not actively participate in interaction. Obviously, in this learning community, students felt obligated to self and others and considered themselves as part of the group. *The pattern of these experiences led me to conclude that engaging students in the co-construction of knowledge cultivated a sense of commitment that helped sustain their participation.* This finding supports what Garrison et al. (2000) described in their study of computer-mediated collaborative learning. According to these researchers, building a sense of belonging facilitates personalized dialogue that is essential to knowledge co-construction.

Students frequently contrasted face-to-face interaction with online interaction when describing the role dialogue played in their learning experience. They noted that although the two types of interaction share a lot in common, they differ from one another in many ways. For example, compared with face-to-face dialogue, online dialogue enabled students to "become less afraid of making mistakes" because nobody can see them, while in a face-to-face dialogue students reported that they chose to use "easier words and sentences" to express themselves. They reported that in an online dialogue, they had more time to think, and more often than in face-to-face dialogue. Although these results tell me how significant online dialogue can be, the focus of my study is on face-to-face and not online dialogue. Thus, I will forego discussion of

the similarities and differences, pros and cons, and debates about online versus face-to-face learning.

Change

Students described frequently and extensively the differences between the current class and their other, more traditional classes and how such differences influenced their way of thinking and learning. They acknowledged that the differences enabled them to see a change in how they looked at themselves, other students, and the teacher. They also acknowledged that adjusting and adapting to the differences took them considerable time and effort. Their description of these differences focused primarily on two aspects: 1) Who is in charge; 2) How English is learned.

In terms of "who is in charge," students reported that in the current class, both the teacher and the student were in charge. This contrasted with the traditional class where the teacher controls. Barbara, for example, reported that being free to ask and answer each other's questions in the current class gave her "a very different feeling" because in the traditional class "it is always the teacher who calls on your name and asks you to answer the question." A similar experience was also reported by Mollie who noted that "If you didn't understand, you couldn't raise the question again, because that would interrupt the teacher's process of teaching." While both Barbara and Mollie were talking about differences between the two classes, Barbara seemed to highlight the freedom that she had when initiating a question, whereas Mollie seemed to emphasize the fear she experienced in a traditional class when raising a question. Examples of these experiences suggest that when the classroom interaction has changed from teacher's

questioning and student's answering to "the teacher and the student co-constructing knowledge through dialogue," students are more likely to "assume a role that traditionally would belong to the teacher" (Richard-Amato, 2003, pp. 72-80).

When talking about how a change in a view of "who is in charge" affected their way of learning, students reported that in the current class, they "learned not only from the teacher but also from themselves," "tended to say more," "kept their thought alive" and "had a lot to do by themselves." The experience of learning "from themselves" suggested that students came to view themselves not as "passive listeners" but as "knowledge constructors" who felt able to contribute to teaching and learning by asking questions. This change in students' self-perceptions can be primarily attributed to the role of questioning. When a student poses a question, especially one which launches a back and forth discussion negotiated through interaction, he/she is often viewed by the group as well as him/herself as directing the flow of dialogue as powerfully as a teacher.

Other experiences of students who noted that they "tended to say more" "kept their thought alive" and "had a lot to do by themselves" indicated that changes had already occurred in their learning. Tim's description of students' "talking out of their heart" is a good example of these changes. Tim reported that learning English by "getting a reference book to see what the book said about the passage" and "reciting the words, phrases and sentences" as they usually did in an IRE class does not enable them to engage in "real thinking." Rather, by adjusting themselves to becoming more comfortable with "asking each other questions" and "inviting each other to say more," students were engaged in listening, interacting and "even reflecting on their

personalities" such that they "became more real" and "talked about something out of their heart." Similar experiences also were reported by Mollie and Lisa when they described how collaborative learning engaged them in thinking and doing a lot more than before. The pattern of *these experiences suggests that how students learn relates to the educational issue of "who is in charge."*

But how do the two concepts relate to each other? Students played different roles when they were engaged in learning through doing and thinking enabled by dialogue. Such roles created opportunities for them to adjust their relationships with me as a teacher, others as peers, and the textbook as a source of information. These changed, and constantly changing, relationships not only empowered students with confidence to see themselves as "teachers" "problem solvers" and "knowledge constructors," they also provided them with opportunities to learn by adjusting their study habits. Eric, for example, experienced "the teacher and the students are all in charge of class." Because of this, he not only "listened" to the teacher but also to his fellow students. Similarly, because they felt "just as responsible as the teacher" for their learning through collaboration, Tim, Lisa, Mollie and several other students experienced a tendency to "think about what the author really means," "reflect on our personal experiences" and "pay attention to details, connections and depth." This finding supports Flannery's (1994) suggestion that a shift from viewing the teacher as the only knower to viewing themselves also as knowers may redirect or readjust students' decision making in collaborative learning.

In terms of differences in "how English is learned," students reported that what made the current class different from a traditional class is that it emphasized "meaning making" instead

of "rote learning." Students noted that in collaborative learning, the teacher did not lecture as much, rather, she facilitated the class to dialogue about the text by showing them how to ask questions, especially those that could "stimulate in-depth thinking." Students also noted that they did not simply "sit there listening and remembering what the teacher said," nor did they "mechanically recite sentences and grammar" as they used to, instead, they spoke, thought, reflected, and took part in activities assigned to them. Students also acknowledged that learning through collaboration allowed them to experience their improvement in language skills, especially in speaking and writing. Tim's statement was most meaningful in expressing how the new pedagogical approach positively affected how he speaks and writes. In this connection he noted that dialogue helped improve his speaking skills because "everyone gets more chances to talk and this talk is different" and because "we use words and sentences that we learned… but not mechanically recite them." He also admitted that what he did in class and elsewhere such as "reading others reflections," "building up ideas about how to write reflections," "reflecting on what comes to our mind about this class," and "describing our experiences" made him more comfortable with writing in English. Tim's experience and those of the other students led me to *conclude that a shift in emphasis away from rote learning to one emphasizing interactively constructing meaning contributed positively to students' language abilities, particularly those involved in speaking and writing.* This finding supports what Swain, et al. (2002) found in their review concerning how peer-peer dialogue is linked to second language learning as students engage in writing, speaking, listening, and reading activities.

Students acknowledged that dialogue not only provided them with opportunities to experience differences in teaching and learning that helped them understand how to become

successful English learners, it also challenged them to adjust in order to learn. Philip, for example, experienced a hard time getting adjusted to collaborative learning. He described how his attitude toward collaborative learning changed from "curious about it" to "feeling it more and more unfruitful" to "how nice it was to respond to others' questions." He admitted that he initially failed to adjust to the new way of learning because he was so "used to the old way" and because "there was a big jump between the previous class and the CL class." He was also aware that even though CL helped improve English in many respects, it may not bring any direct benefits to test results, which are "the things most of Chinese students care about." He also was aware that CL "would have brought more benefits ahead of us" if "we had combined the content discussed in CL classes with those in previous classes." Similar experiences were also described by Lisa when she reported that even though dialogue led her to a deeper understanding of the text, it did not help her much with vocabulary and structure, which, she thought, was a "barrier" to her understanding of the passage. These experiences reported by students revealed that *understanding a new way of learning and getting adjusted to it takes time and effort.* However, it is not the case that students accept everything associated with the new way -- what they chose to accept are those ideas that make sense to them. For those that they cannot understand, they either feel frustrated or refuse to accept them. This finding agrees with what Peters and Armstrong (1998), Armstrong (1999), Dillivan (2004) and Gray (2008) found in their studies of collaborative learning in a higher education setting.

In their article about collaborative learning, Peters and Armstrong (1998) also point out that students are often frustrated when they engage in collaborative learning because of the prior long-term effects of traditional ways of teaching and learning. They assume that students are

likely to come into a collaborative learning situation with expectations associated with the traditional way of looking at teaching and learning. They noted that when students find what they are doing and achieving is not what they expected to do and achieve, they may become disappointed. Peters and Armstrong proposed that both teachers and students who seek to engage in collaborative learning need to "overcome the habits of expectation" (p.75). In my study, when Philip was frustrated about his inability to know "what to do in class and out," he may have expected that I, the teacher, would tell him what to do and he would take notes, identify my expectations, and fulfill them. Similarly, when Lisa complained that she was not able to learn all the new words and structures that appeared in the text, her expectations of me or of the course might have been that I was supposed to explain all the new words or grammatical structures in class before leading them to discussion. Philip and Lisa's frustration with their experience can be attributed to a perceived inability to achieve what they originally expected, which affected their engagement in dialogue at some point during the course.

Armstrong (1999) found in his study of collaborative learning courses that students felt frustrated at the beginning of the semester, but frustration levels generally reduced as time passed. In his discussion, Armstrong reported that students initially were concerned that they did not know what they were doing, or that what they were doing was not being done correctly. Armstrong also reported that students would often cite the process or the facilitator as a major source of frustration. When students in his study realized that collaborative learning represents a new way of learning, they were able to adapt to the process, thereby minimizing their frustrations. In contrast, none of the students that I studied expressed feeling frustrated at the very beginning of the course; on the contrary, almost all reported that they felt excited or curious about what

they were experiencing or going to experience. Frustration began when they recognized that, although involvement in the dialogical process reinforced their thinking and promoted speaking and writing in the long run, it did not help as much with acquiring vocabulary and grammar as rote learning. They thought this might negatively affect their test results. As the dynamic of dialogue constantly and vigorously involved them in its processes, they were likely to reevaluate what they were doing. Thus, when Philip successfully engaged other students in discussion, he was not only excited but also proud of himself. A feeling such as this would often make a difference in student assumptions about collaborative learning. As Philip put it, "How nice it was to respond to others' questions."

Richard-Amato (2003) points out that students sometimes resist new ways of looking at teaching and learning, especially in the beginning. If they discover some truth in them based on their own experience, however, they are more likely to give them serious consideration, to talk about them with peers and, eventually, to accept those that make sense to them. Richard-Amato (2003) contends that "the most acceptable and enduring innovations are those that do not bluntly tear down what already exists" (p.1). This observation also holds true in my study. For example, when Lisa reported that "some of the words in the text I still do not know," she seemed be suggesting that while dialogue helped to produce a better understanding of some text through interaction and critical thinking processes, other methods (such as lecturing) could, at the same time, help the learner understand other language knowledge (such as grammar) required to meet immediate communication needs. When Philip reported that combining collaborative learning with some traditional ways of learning "would have brought more benefits ahead of us," he seemed to suggest that even though engaging in dialogue contributed greatly to learning,

analyzing a few complicated grammatical structures would also benefit meaning making. Although not shared by all, what Lisa and Philip reported here represented the voice of those who wanted me to incorporate in collaborative learning what, they believed, could better help them learn vocabulary and grammar. This conversation led me to a consideration that when I engage students in adjusting themselves to become more comfortable with the dialogical environment that we were constantly creating, I, the teacher, also need to make timely adjustments in my facilitation so as to meet the needs of students and thereby sustain collaborative learning.

Chapter Six

Conclusions, My Practical Theory Revisited, and Implications

In Chapter Five, I discussed the results of my study in terms of the themes of relationship, confidence, engagement and change. I also discussed the subthemes deriving from each of the four primary themes and their relationships to one another and to the primary theme. I also described how the four themes are interrelated to one another in terms of how students and I engaged in creating a supportive dialogical environment. In this chapter, I present a summary of my conclusions based on the findings and discussion, revisit my practical theory in light of my conclusions, and discuss several implications suggested by the study.

Conclusions

Based on what I concluded from the discussion of each of the four themes, I was able to draw conclusions about how students and I experienced creating a supportive dialogical environment in our IRE class. The following is a summary of these conclusions:

Engaging students in creating a socially supported dialogical environment resulted in improved interpersonal relationships and the formation of a language learning community. The freedom, equality and openness provided by dialogue were related to these changes in relationship. A sense of community, resulting from an awareness of being responsible for what was going on in this learning community, increased student participation and sustained interactions that involved not only meaning making but also language using.

Confidence building is strongly connected to other personal factors such as respect, tolerance, recognition and comfort. Engaging students in creating an affectively-supported dialogical environment increased the degree of comfort, decreased the level of anxiety, and improved student self-confidence. An awareness of showing respect, tolerating minor grammatical mistakes, and recognizing peer contributions when engaging in dialogue enhanced students' willingness to communicate with one another.

Dialogue played a strong role in engaging students in activities, practices, and uses of the English language. By engaging in asking and answering one another's questions, students were able to think creatively and reflectively, use English language repeatedly, and understand texts from different perspectives. By participating in both in and out-of-class activities designed to support and sustain dialogue, students were involved in speaking, listening, reading and writing that led to improved language skills. The on-going dialogical process, with its focus on knowledge co-construction, not only challenged but also supported student thinking and reflecting that extended both individual and group learning. The instructor's approach to facilitating students to become aware of engaging one another in such a process enabled them to develop a sense of commitment to learning that in turn promoted engagement.

The differences that students experienced in terms of teaching and learning led them to reevaluate the roles they played in the English learning classroom. Posing and responding to one another's questions in contrast to answering questions posed exclusively by the teacher seemed to empower students and enable them to feel they were playing the role of teacher. A changed perception of roles appeared to affect their learning experience. They came to say, think and do

more in the class than in the previous classes. Because collaborative learning -- especially

dialogue -- was a different way of learning for them, students had to adjust and adapt themselves

to it. However, frustration about not knowing what to do and concern about grades and exams

sometimes negatively influenced their adjustment.

The four themes – relationship, confidence, engagement and change, would seem to

define the essence of collaborative learning in our IRE class. Although students and the teacher

might be focused on one element at a time, the combination of all the elements would yield those

moments of collaborative learning students and the teacher were dialogically seeking.

My Practical Theory Revisited

Prior to designing and implementing my study I developed a practical theory about how

I might facilitate collaborative learning in my IRE class. I theorized that creating a dialogical

environment that takes social, affective and pedagogical dimensions of support into

consideration would promote student engagement in dialogue. I considered a supportive

dialogical environment in a FL classroom as a space, a context, and/or a relationship which

would enable participants to develop an awareness of how knowledge about the English

language is socially constructed when everyone in the group is respected and offered an equal

chance to talk. I also assumed that methods and activities designed in such an environment

should accommodate the social and affective dimensions of support and sustain students' full

engagement in dialogue where everyone is viewed as a co-constructor of knowledge. The results

of my study indicate that students were aware of the presence of relationship, confidence,

engagement and change, which turned out to be the major indicators of the three dimensions of

support mentioned in my practical theory, i.e., creating a dialogical environment which incorporates social, affective and pedagogical dimensions of support can help promote student engagement in dialogue.

In terms of the social dimension of support, students experienced improved interpersonal relationships, a sense of building a learning community, making connections to others and otherness, responsibility, and a free, equal and open dialogical environment where they expressed their "real" ideas and thoughts. Such experiences support this aspect of my practical theory in general and Garrison et al.'s (2000) description of a dialogical learning environment in specific. These authors' description of the presence of social support mainly includes the following indicators: free and secure dialogue, negotiation, agreement, a sense of group commitment and open and purposeful communication.

In terms of the affective dimension of support, students reported being aware of increased levels of comfort, decreased intensity of anxiety, and improved self-confidence. They also exhibited respect, tolerance for grammatical mistakes and recognition of each other's contribution. These indicators of affective dimension of support agree largely with the affective dimension of my practical theory and what Garrison et al. (2000) cited as indicators of a dialogical learning environment. Two indicators mentioned by these authors are: 1) humor and self-disclosure that would engender trust, respect, support and a sense of belonging; and 2) mutual awareness and recognition of each other's contribution that would reinforce attentiveness. My students reported experiencing reduced anxiety. However, they did not report experiencing any example of humorous behavior.

Students experienced the presence of the pedagogical dimension of support by expressing the following indicators: engaging in asking each other questions, thinking creatively, reflecting on dialogue, using language in a real communicative context, developing a sense commitment and sharing. They also were aware of a change in the pedagogy and a need to adjust and adapt themselves to the new way of teaching and learning. These experiences of students again support what Garrison et al. (2000) described as indicators of pedagogical dimension of support. Garrison et al., however, seemed to be emphasizing the teacher's role when they identified *design of learning activities* and *teacher's facilitation* as two general categories of supportive indicators. My students, on the other hand, appeared to be focused on the effects of pedagogical support on learning when they reported that they were aware of their own experience of co-learning and teaching. Student descriptions of their experiences also agree with what I described in my practical theory suggesting that students did feel supported by my facilitation and by the activities I designed for them.

It is clear that the themes deriving from what students reported match very well the three of Garrison et al.'s dimensions and the assumptions that help make up my practical theory, including the interactive aspects of the dimensions. For example, the experiences of students that define the theme of relationship are related to the social dimension of support; confidence to the affective dimension of support; and engagement to the pedagogical dimension of support. However, one theme discussed by students that does not appear in either my own perspective or that of Garrison, et al. is that of change. This theme seems to be related to any and all of the other themes. These results indicate that change may be a candidate for inclusion in both my practical theory and Garrison et al.'s (2000) theory.

Implications

The aim of this study was to understand how collaborative learning takes place in our English learning class and how it helped to improve students' learning and my teaching. A skillful reflection on what students and I were collaboratively undertaking in creating a supportive dialogical learning environment promised to reinforce my understanding and benefit my future actions. Although my study was limited to one class and one group of students, the results may have implications for teachers in similar settings. In this section, I will discuss some implications of this research for my own practice, for foreign language teaching and learning, and for further research.

Implications for My Practice

Before doing this action research, I had strong assumptions about the process of teaching and learning. I was actually afraid of initiating change, because of the various constraints of the teaching situation in China. These constraints include: negative effects from the examination system, which places a strong emphasis on knowledge of the language rather than language-using abilities; limited contact hours, with compulsory teaching requirements; and traditional learning habits on the part of students as well as traditional teaching habits of teachers. I assumed that the safe way to carry out my teaching was to follow the traditional methods – a teacher-dominant style, with much teacher explanation of sentence structures and language points.

The high level of commitment and reflection that action research demands from me has increased my confidence about what to do, how, and why. My desire to actively seek change has grown. For example, I consciously reflect on each of our class meetings, on the problems of a particular situation, on the progress made by the group or a particular student, and on my facilitation and students' participation. Writing reflections regularly has been a very useful instrument for me. I have become more aware of students' needs and difficulties, and eager to seek solutions to meet these needs and difficulties and help students solve their problems. By doing this action research project, I have an opportunity to develop my professional autonomy, and to initiate a number of collaborative activities and techniques which I would otherwise have been unlikely to attempt.

Providing students with opportunities to reflect openly on how they experience learning English in a new way shed light on what we all were trying to accomplish in an IRE class: becoming more competent English learners. Writing reflections and orally reflective activities enabled students to become more aware of the teaching and learning process, share their feelings, and creatively use their language skills. Therefore, in my future actions, I plan to 1) continue to ask students to write reflections on how they experience each class; 2) continue to ask students to express orally what stood out for them by debriefing at the end of each class; 3) add a shared reflective activity that encourages both students and me to articulate our problems, needs, and solutions; and 4) keep a weekly reflective journal on my part. Such measures promise to aid confidence-building, trigger creative thinking, and insure that I as a teacher continue to keep an open mind for improvement.

Participation in action research allows for students to experience and understand difference in pedagogy, which often causes change in students. It is, however, always possible that students do not understand what this opportunity means in the beginning of their experience. They may merely participate in the different experience because they are curious about it and because they are required to do so. However, at some point, they are likely to make comparisons by reflecting on both the new experience and the ones they are more familiar with and then choose to accept or ignore the new process. After experiencing this struggle, my students came to understand that there are multiple ways of learning English; i.e., keeping an open mind enables them to know more. Their ways of looking at learning and themselves as learners have changed as a result of exploring and understanding the difference that CL made in their class experience. These rooted-in-belief changes will undoubtedly affect their future reflective thinking and confidence building which, I believe, is an important addition to any foreign language learning course.

Implications for Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

The significance of this action research would be the impact it may have on Chinese English teachers who want to improve their teaching, even though they may be somewhat impeded by institutional restraints and their own beliefs about teaching and learning. As my research is grounded in my practice – teaching English as a foreign language in a university of China, its results are not intended to be generalizable to the broader concerns of teachers of foreign languages. However, the study may have some practical and applicable meaning for other teachers in situations similar to my own. What I want to emphasize is that although my

research only partially mirrors how my students experienced learning English in a place where knowledge was not transmitted by me but constructed by us, the ongoing meaning making is a performance of new skills with other group members. A second thing I want to emphasize is that a commonly held view among teachers in China about the inappropriateness of "new" ("Western") techniques in the Chinese context" does not hold true in my study. Dialogue as inquiry, a "new" technique used for my study, actually worked very well in engaging students in speaking, reflecting and creative thinking. But why do we sometimes refuse to try something new or different? This is probably because we do not want to break out our comfortable zone, and because we take it too much for granted that the way we teach and learn might not be the "best" but is the "safest."

Furthermore, what this study underscored is the importance of 1) accepting the student's role as a knowledge constructor; 2) creating a relationship of mutual respect that supports student engagement in meaning making; and 3) acknowledging student personal learning experiences as a source of knowledge and understanding. An emphasis on increasing students' role may have a constructive impact on strengthening teacher awareness of making a classroom learner-centered. Since the late 1980s there has been a top-down movement to reform English language teaching in China. An important component of this reform has been an effort to build a learner-centered classroom by using communicative methodologies that emphasize the student's role in communicative activities. Because of the various restraints, however, on the adoption of those communicative methodologies in the Chinese context, building a learner-centered classroom is often a matter of paying lip-service (Hu, 2002). English teaching and learning in China remains traditional, explanatory, and teacher-centered (Hu, 2002; Li, 1984; Rao, 1986; Thorne & Wang,

1996). My study shows that accepting the student's role as a knowledge constructor can have meaningful results for the student self-perception of his/her English learning ability – an ability directly related to confidence building. My study also shows that creating a dialogical space where students' shared meaning is made legitimate actually enhances the level of engagement. This enabled students to further their own English learning. Thus, this study offers some tentative but valuable implications for language teachers who want the use learner-centered, interactive methodologies but fear that they would lose control and opportunity to transmit knowledge.

In summary, this study suggests a new perspective from which English as a foreign language is taught and learned in a college IRE class. As its name suggested, IRE class is one which is highly intensified and aimed at training different skills of English. It is a required English course offered by almost all of the universities and colleges for both English majors and non-English majors in China. For most teachers, explanation of language points or translation between languages is a gateway to understanding reading materials. What my study suggests is that we engage students in dialogue about what they were reading. This is an entirely different way to approach reading because, instead of relying exclusively on the teacher's explanation, what students say also enhances their understanding. Students reported that multiple perspectives led them to better and deeper understandings of what writers wrote and why they wrote the way they did. Students also reported that meaning constructed this way usually left them with a deep and prolonged impression that helped them to retain what they learned. The results indicated that there were improved relationships and increased levels of responsibility and tolerance among students that promoted their participation in communication. Hence, this study has important

social and pedagogical implications for teachers who want to make their students better speakers

and writers through an IRE course but doubt that they might not finish their teaching if they

allowed students more time for meaning making.

Implications for Further Research

The Study's Contribution to Research. My research adds to the limited action research

on professional development in the field of foreign language teaching and learning in China.

These research projects include: *Action research in language teacher education* by Thorne and

Wang (1996); *Collaborative enquiry, action research, and curriculum development in rural*

China by Li and Laidlaw (2006); and *A study of professional development of college English*

teachers through narrative inquiries by Ma and Ren (2011). While four studies that focus on a

particular research tradition (action research) in the Chinese context do not constitute a body of

literature, they do collectively shed light on the way collaborative inquiries work in different

settings. Although in different forms, the authors of the three studies all engaged their

participants in reflective practice at the departmental level for the *purpose* of professional

development. My research, however, is performed in the context of classroom teaching and

learning, which offers insights into the dynamic of engaging students in both interactive and

reflective practice in a classroom setting for the purpose of fostering both academic and

professional improvement.

My research also adds to the DATA-DATA model-based action research on collaborative

learning in classroom settings. Examples of these research projects include: Composition

classroom narratives of teaching and learning by Gray (2008); Knowledge construction of in

graduate education: a case study by Dillivan (2004); Collaborative learning: a study of two classes by Armstrong (1999); and Together we know more than we know we know: Collaborative learning with information technology students by Merrill (2003). Although we all engaged our students in collaborative learning in our classrooms, we facilitated or taught different subject matters. While we all engaged students in dialogue to make meaning of our world, I engaged my students in doing so in a language which is not their own. My research, therefore, provides insights into the dynamic of engaging students in collaborative learning through dialogue in a foreign language setting. It also adds to the findings of Gray's study, in terms of how freedom and equality offered by dialogue influences students' confidence building in meaning making.

As a researcher, I learned a lot about formal research from doing this dissertation, especially in relation to developing a carefully-designed methodology. I learned how keeping a more reflective stance helped me balance my role as a teacher and a researcher when doing research in my own practice. I learned how developing a practical theory helped me make a focus and how revising the original theory in light of findings strengthened my awareness of looking back before moving forward. I learned how a constant, back-and- forth examination of data kept me on track with students' experiences instead of relying on my personal bias. Finally, I learned how experience of writing helped me to become more confident about myself as a writer.

Further Research. A number of questions arose from my findings, each relevant to dialogue and its relation to teaching and learning in an IRE class. These questions should be of

interest to foreign language teachers or researchers who want to further understand collaborative learning in general and dialogue in particular or to develop creative and innovative ways to move forward. Examples of areas worthy of study include:

1) *How learning styles and personality relate to student participation in dialogue.* My research shows even though we created an equal dialogical environment, some students were more active than others in terms of speaking. English proficiency may account for this phenomenon but my study shows that the most active students were not necessarily good English learners.

2) *How language accuracy relates to student engagement in dialogue.* Although my research reveals that a tolerance of "ok" English promoted speaking that led to meaning making, further research needs to be done to determine whether dialogue influences language accuracy in the long run.

3) *How test results relate to learning through dialogue.* Both students and teachers in China are concerned about test results, especially results of standardized tests. Students in my study indicated their worries and concerns about being tested for their English proficiency and knowledge. A shared myth among my students seemed to be that collaborative learning, though vigorous and powerful in many aspects, might not be as robust as rote learning in terms of achieving ideal test scores**.** Further research needs to be done to determine whether engaging students in dialogue has an influence on their test results and in what respect.

4) *How achievements are assessed and evaluated when we engage students in learning*

through dialogue. Currently, the primary means for English teachers to assess

students' achievements is through tests or exams designed to evaluate mostly grammar

and vocabulary. Dialogue, however, emphasizes meaning making and personal

involvement. How to assess or evaluate what students have achieved through these

processes needs to be addressed by further research. What also needs to be addressed is

the student ability at meaning making from dialogue.

Reflections on Method. Similar to Roberts' (2005) writing experience, I also found

Peters' (1997, 2002) DATA-DATA model to be a rigorous but difficult method for developing

my practical theory and conducting my research. I agreed with Roberts that part of the difficulty

in using this model is related to the critically-reflective nature of the process. I also agreed with

her that the difficulty is intensified when reflection is required in all phases of the model instead

of reflecting only at certain phases. In my case, this constant reflection resulted in careful

consideration of every part of the study and of the relationship between parts and whole.

If I were to conduct this study again, with the benefit of hindsight, I would pay more

attention to my own experience of facilitating and how it may have shaped students' experience.

I might consider tape-recording my facilitation and the conversations between students and me,

analyzing the tape-recorded data, and more deliberately adjusting my facilitation methods based

on the analysis. Even though I wrote reflections on every period of class and noted a change in

my view of my students, myself and teacher-student relationship, following a tape-recorded

method may have resulted in a clearer picture of how my own facilitating experience affected me

and my students.

Closing Reflections

Indeed, I had many concerns and worries about many things at the beginning of this research. The reason for this is clear: I am a novice. Looking back, I see how these worries and concerns actually helped me complete this project because they served as a timely reminder of the need for constant care of each step I took in the process. It is not until the completion of this project that I have a sense of myself as a writer, a researcher, a practitioner, and a teacher. By conducting this research, I learned that helping others to learn is actually helping both self and others to learn. I also learned that using language to allow others to understand oneself actually involves an understanding of other participants. Through this action research, I feel a personal connection with my students and am committed to using my knowledge and their personal experiences to expand and improve my teaching. I am convinced that being open and listening to students' perspectives is learning in itself. Finally, doing this research heightened my awareness of the importance of meaning making in a foreign language learning context. I now encourage students to share with me how they think so that I may engage their thoughts rather than simplytelling them what I assume is true.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Example of Overall Textural-Structural Description of the Phenomenon

Student #8

This class is fresh, spontaneous and different. Instead of waiting for the teacher to ask us questions, we invite each other to speak. The traditional class is controlled by the teacher. Dialogue to learn is unpredictable, so the teacher cannot control it. We are free to tell what we think about the text. We speak unconsciously like chatting in Chinese. I felt good about answering my classmates' questions. I would not be denied if I failed to answer the questions. We see things from different perspectives. When parts are connected, we make it a whole. It is my responsibility to take care of others. I feel like we are in a family because we are closer in relationship. I like to share because it helps the group to progress. We are aroused to think. Face-to-face dialogue has less time for reflection. I felt a sense of achievement when steering discussion successfully. We are committed to the group. We learned collaboratively by getting together again and again. I did all this in English –thinking, speaking, speaking, reading, and writing.

Appendix B – Informed Consent Statement

 "Creating a supportive dialogical environment: How a group of Chinese students experience CL in an Intensive Reading English Class"

The following information is provided for you to decide whether you would like to participate in my dissertation research on the experience of collaborative learning English. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with the researcher or the instructor.

The purpose of this study is to understand the essence of collaborative learning in a foreign language learning context. The research model I am using is a qualitative one through which I am seeking comprehensive descriptions of your collaborative learning experience. In this way I hope to answer my question "What is my students experience with collaborative learning in an Intensive Reading English class when they engage in dialogue to learn English as a foreign language?"

Data collection will involve interviews (tape-recorded transcripts of interviews with participants), field notes (made by the researcher), and reflections (written by the participants). Please do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study either before participating or during the time you are participating. I can be reached at: (0411)84708565 or with this email: rli1@utk.edu. I would be happy to share the findings with you after the research is completed. However, your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and your identity will be known only to the researcher.

There are no known risks and/or discomforts associated with this study.

The expected benefits associated with your participation are the information about the experience in phenomenological action research and the opportunity to participate in a phenomenological action research study. If submitted for publication, a byline will indicate the participation of all students in the class.

_____

CONSENT I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

Appendix C – Participant Release Agreement

 I agree to participate in a research study of "What is your experience with collaborative learning in an English Intensive Reading class?" I understand the purpose and nature of this study and I am participating voluntarily. I grant permission for the data to be used in the process of completing a PhD. degree, including a dissertation and any other future publication. I agree to meet at the following location _____ on the following date_____ at _____ of 40 to 60 minutes. If necessary, I will be available at a mutually agreed upon time and place for an additional 40-minute interview. I also grant permission to tape-recording of the interview(s).

        _____   _____
      Research Participant/Date   Primary Researcher/Date

Appendix D - Interpretative Research Group Member Pledge of Confidentiality

"Creating a supportive dialogical environment: How a group of Chinese students experience CL in an Intensive Reading English Class"

As an interpretative research group member providing feedback on the research project, I understand that I will be reading section of thematic analysis from transcribed interview tapes. Although real names and other identifying data will have been removed or changed to protect privacy, I realize that the information from these transcripts has been revealed by research participants who participated in this project in good faith that their interviews would remain strictly confidential. I understand that I have a responsibility to honor this confidential agreement. I hereby agree not to share any information on these transcripts with anyone except the primary researcher of this project. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards, and I pledge not to do so.

_____   _____
Interpretive Research Group Member   Date

_____   _____
Researcher   Date

Appendix E – Example of Student weekly Reflections

Reflection

Today, it is the very first time that I am exposed to collaborative learning. As a matter of fact, I don't really know what this certain learning style could really bring me. My view of the new method is confined to a new way of sitting in the classroom. We don't have traditional seats this time; instead, we sit around a large desk. As I prefer the front seat in the classroom, so usually, I don't really see many other students in our class, which is part of the reason why I am quite slow in memorizing the names and faces of my classmates when I am in a different class. It is quite embarrassing sometimes. The first experience of a brand new learning method feels quite strange. I am always an active student in English classes, and I love to talk in class and love to have my voice heard. But my speech in class mainly deals with the textbook or the examinations. It is total new to me to talk so much about personal learning experience so much in intensive reading class. From those dialogues, I really come to know more about the classmates. I used to think that I know everyone in my class more than well. I know their names, faces, characters, style of doing thing, etc. But today, I was so surprised when I come to understand that they have experiences, family backgrounds and perspectives totally different from mine. And I feel like as if I never knew them. I used to think that in every family, parenting is more or less the same, which is no more than love and caring, teaching and urging their children to study, because we live in the same country. The conversation today proved me wrong, and it let me know that we have to respect the different interest and different ways of learning. This class really helped me a lot. I look forward to experiencing more of this cooperative style of learning.

Appendix F – Example of Student Pre-Class Writing

Pre-class writing of Lesson Twelve

 The essay is written in a casual way to introduce the central park to the readers. The author describes his own experience that he slept late at night in the central park and shared some history stories of central park. Many New Yorkers are proud of the central park because it is very large and the scenery there is fantastic and natural. It provides a heaven for the artists to hold concerts and citizens to have a good time during the day, but it turns out to be a hell of purse snatchers, loons, prostitutes, drug dealers, and murderers—not to mention bullies, garrotters and highway robbers. Not everyone likes the Park, but just about everyone feels he should.
I can feel the author's love for the park; I don't know why he wants to spend the night in the central park which is agreed by all a dangerous place then, however, he seems to prove to us it is not as dangerous as it is believed to be. At last, he even became frightening instead of being frightened by others. And he finally fell asleep because the moment he got up again would be in the morning when the bird, representing good nature, would sing.

 I have got a question. I can't find any connection between the title and the rest of the passage. Is "Lions and Tigers and Bears" a metaphorical title or is there pre-text explaining the reason the author wants to sleep in the central park?

Appendix G – Example of Student Final Reflection

Final reflection

When I sat here to write this final reflection, different emotions came to me, such as excitement, satisfaction, disappointment and so on. Because I know that I will not have English Intensive Reading any more. And maybe I will not have the collaborative learning class. I feel sorrow about that. But I am still excited. I feel that I was lucky because I have the chance to get to know what is collaborative learning. And I was one of the lucky dogs who got benefit from collaborative learning.

Collaborative learning is a kind of new thing to me. Even before I took part in this kind of class, I didn't know the meaning of "collaborative". In the last few weeks of Intensive Reading class, we try this kind of class. It really did a lot of help to me. The first feeling is that in this class, I can say more than the other English classes. In fact, English is a language, and I we don't say much English, we can't study it very well. This class gave me a chance to say more and I improved my English skill through talking English in the class. I feel that I have learned a lot of words and grammar through talking and hearing the others talking. It always takes me a lot of time to remember words and it is easy to forget. But when I try to use these words in the dialogue, it is much easier to remember the words in this way.

Second, collaborative learning is a kind of learning style that we should ask others questions and help others think more of the topic, in this way all of the students will understand the topic deeply. This kind of feeling happened to me many times, when I say something, and the others asked back which really made me think more. In this kind of learning style, we all need the other person's help and we all have the duty to help the others. At first, I dare not to say my opinion in the class, because I was afraid that I couldn't answer the others question if they asked back. After finishing a few classes, I learned to think my topic deeply before I share my opinion, in this way I was not afraid of answering the other person's question.

Another thing is that I felt very free in this class. Because we don't focus that much on the passage, so we can say whatever we want in the class. The passage just gave us a topic that we can talk about it. In other English classes, the topic we talk about always is so limited that I nearly have nothing to say. And the presenter really plays an important part in the class. The presenter led our topic in the class. I remember that I was the presenter when we learned Lesson 13. My feeling is that to be the presenter can help us get to know the passage deeply. I read the passage time by time and checked a lot of books to make sure I understood the text. I also asked the other students' opinion. In that way, I can remember that passage deeply until now.

In this class, we can improve our listening skill very much. Different people have different ways to express their ideas, so when a new English teacher came to me, it always took me some time to adjust to this teacher. But this time, I not only listened to the teacher talking, but also I had to listen to every classmate talking. This kind of experience really helped me improve my listening skill. I still remember the first class, it was really hard for me to get to know all the meaning of

what the author have said. I had to look at the teacher's mouth all the time. But as time went by, I can understand nearly all what the others said.

When I sat in the classroom, I felt I was sat in the family more than in the classroom. All the students sat in a circle and we could see each other's face. This kind of feeling can help me open my mind and more good ideas will come to me than in the other classes. The students are as important as the teacher, because we all can help others to learn the article deeply. Whenever someone brings a new idea to us, he or she will be the leader and we can say our opinion under his leading or we can bring a new idea. This is very much like the style that we are talking at home. We can imagine that when we talking at home, we will not feel restrained and we can say whatever we want to say.

But to some degree, the collaborative learning does a little harm to our words learning, and at most of the time, we always talked about the theme of the passage, but some good or important sentences were neglected. Maybe it is more like the learning style in the countries who take English as their first language. But as for us, not all of us fit this kind of learning style very much. Some of us not do a tremendous work in English, if the word and sentence study is neglected by us, it will be hard for us improving our English skill very much. So in collaborative learning, as a student, we should do more work, only in this way can we receive all the benefit from this kind of learning. And I think as a teacher, we should not only ask the students to write more after class, we had better urge the students to pay more attention to the words and sentences study.

I have read a book called "who move my cheese", It gave me an idea that we should try to adjust to the changes. And this class changed the learning style that I had from the first day I went to school. I really appreciate you bring change to me and make me get touched new things. If I have a chance, I will go on try this learning style and make it more perfect.

Appendix H – Example of My Field Notes

May, 8, 2009, Friday

 I got to the classroom 10 minutes before the class began and had the seats arranged in a circle. Some students helped me with this. They looked curious about what we were doing but they didn't ask why. More students arrived at the classroom. They sat around the table but the space was not big enough for students sitting in the corner to see the students in the other corner. Yue, the regular teacher, came at the last moment and she kept saying sorry for her coming late. We exchanged a few words with each other before we started. She first introduced me to the class and then took a seat opposite me. I told the class that I became nervous while walking towards the classroom and I asked students why they thought I was feeling like that. One student said because I was facing so many strangers. I said I was nervous because I thought I was a teacher. I thought a teacher should know more and speak better. Then I asked them if they agreed. Most students agreed and one male student said he didn't agree. He said the teacher was not the only one who was in charge of teaching. Another girl nodded and I asked her why. She said she agreed with him. I asked her to say more. She said for something the teacher may know more, for other things students may know more. I said "I agree." I then told the class what I was there for. I said I wanted to be with them after staying way from teaching for some years. I said I had been a doctoral student at a university in the USA and wanted to share with them some of my learning experiences. Finally, I told them I was in the phase of doing my dissertation.

Vita

Rong Li was born in Beijing, China. At age nine, she and her family relocated to Huhehot, Inner Mongolia, and she subsequently graduated from Huhehot No. 2 Railway Middle School. She then settled down in Taohua Commune, Huhehot as an "educated youth." After four years laboring in the fields, Rong went back to school for a diploma in English at Huhehot Normal School. She then started teaching English at Huhehot Sugar Refinery Factory Middle School. She returned to school again for a Bachelor's degree at Inner Mongolia Teacher's University, majoring English language and literature. Upon graduation in 1982, she remained at university as an assistant professor of English. In 1994, Rong and her family moved to Dalian, Liao Ning, where she taught English at Dalian University of Technology. She came to the University of Tennessee in 2002 as a visiting scholar working for a year with Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures Department. Rong holds a master degree in TESL from Sheffield Hallam University, UK and a doctoral degree in Educational Psychology from the University of Tennessee, USA. She is now an Associate Professor of English at Dalian University of Technology. She has published three book chapters and numerous articles in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language. Rong lives in Dalian, China with her husband, Tiechuan Cao, professor of math at Dalian University of Technology. They have a son, Yue Cao.