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# Qualitative Study Of Taiwanese Students Studying Abroad: Social Interactions, Navigating Us Culture, And Experiences Learning English Language

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**QUALITATIVE STUDY OF TAIWANESE STUDENTS STUDYING ABROAD:  
SOCIAL INTERACTIONS, NAVIGATING U.S. CULTURE, AND EXPERIENCES  
LEARNING ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

by

**JOYCE CHING-YI WU**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

2014

MAJOR: EDUCATION EVALUATION AND  
RESEARCH

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teachers, and parents as they consider ways to adjust teaching English as second language.

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## CHAPTER 1:

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the research study and argues for the need to study how Taiwanese college students studying abroad in the United States learned English before they came to the U.S., what their English-language experiences have been during their time in the U.S., and to what extent they became able to participate in social interactions and learn better English skills through such interactions. Since my study involves Taiwanese students learning English abroad, it is important to consider the historical context for the teaching and learning of English in Taiwan itself. In this way, one can better understand the reasons why Taiwanese students decide to study abroad as well as their perceptions of that experience. In what follows, the chapter covers the need for Taiwanese to learn English, the various ways that English is incorporated in Taiwanese education and other learning settings, and the importance of integrating language and culture to become a proficient speaker of a foreign language.

Due to the rise of globalization, the English language increasingly influences Taiwanese life. As Graddol (2006) states:

We are entering a phase of global English, which is less glamorous, less newsworthy, and further from the leading edge of exciting ideas. It is the “implementation stage,” which will shape future identities, economies and cultures. The way this stage is

managed could determine the futures of several generations (p. 109).

In Taiwan, three major languages are spoken—Mandarin, Taiwanese, and Hakka. In 1948, the government announced Mandarin as official language, with Taiwanese and Hakka as dialects. Since 1949, English instruction occurred in junior high schools. The government's rationale for teaching the English language was that English became the global business language. When Taiwan joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, Taiwan entered the global village and the English language became even more important as a skill in order to communicate with foreigners about technology and business.

English language instruction became part of the regular school curriculum in 1994. With Mandarin the mother tongue of Taiwan, English is considered a foreign language. The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan endorsed a series of policies and programs to encourage the development of Taiwanese students' English skill. Since 1997, the planning of the Reform of Education began with English education in the fifth grade of elementary school. The capital city of Taiwan, Taipei City, initiated this policy, which focused on a curriculum in speaking and listening skills in the English language. Kindergartens in Taiwan teach English-Chinese bilingual education because some parents and educators believe that learning English language during early childhood development allows quicker assimilation (Su, 2006). In fact, "a public opinion survey published in January 2006 found that 80% of the respondents said they hope that the government will designate English the second official

language” in Taiwan (Graddol, 2006, p. 89). The role of English as a foreign language in Taiwanese education thus has been emerging from kindergartens to college.

Diverse ways of teaching English exist in Taiwan. Some English-learning sites—the bilingual kindergartens, the private language institutions (known as “cram schools”), and some private schools—employ native speakers of English, such as from South Africa, Australia, Canada, and America, to instruct Taiwanese students using English language teaching curriculum. Here, English language teaching curricula use English as a second language (ESL) to teach. But the Taiwanese government required English be taught as a foreign language (EFL) in the public schools. These two language-learning approaches—ESL, EFL—are very different. For example, some Taiwanese students who study English as a foreign language teaching lack good oral proficiency and social interaction with foreigners. In Taiwan, the methodology used is often teacher-centered instruction in the classroom. The students are quiet and listen to the teachers talk to learn independently. Moreover, many teachers rely on pen and paper tests in the class. Unfortunately, Taiwanese English teachers use Mandarin Chinese to instruct the English language curriculum, which limits students’ contact with spoken English. In addition, the curricula of junior and senior high schools in Taiwan concentrate primarily on the meaning of vocabulary, on syntax and grammar, and on translation contexts, so students are better prepared to pass college entrance examinations. Historically, foreign languages have been primarily learned for passing entrance exams, and

these languages have not been spoken or played a major role in the Taiwanese community (Ellis, 1994). Thus, Taiwanese high school graduates often lack oral skills speaking English, as well as lack the ability to use English in social interactions.

Since 1951, when Taiwan and the United States signed a contract for cooperation and started culture exchanges, the importance of being able to communicate (rather than being able to pass college entrance exams) increased, but these goals were not achieved when Taiwanese people spoke English with Americans. Several things contributed to their difficulties. Chen and Hsieh (2008) found that Taiwanese people lacked sufficient pronunciation, vocabulary and syntax skills, as well as needed to learn more about American culture to use syntax suitably. This is not surprising since Taiwanese students' earlier instruction did not give a high priority to speaking English in everyday settings. Also, because of the distance between Taiwan and the United States, Taiwanese people learned a misshapen American culture from the movies. The lack of English-speaking role models continued, because the first Taiwanese who came to the United States (for studying or working) did not return to Taiwan or otherwise provide feedback to members of Taiwanese society about how American culture differed from movies. Furthermore, Taiwanese learners looked upon the English language as merely one of their school subjects. This is an important concern because, as Gillette (1994) noted, "if a learner's initial motive determines the quality of language study overall, it also influences the effectiveness of specific strategies" (p. 211).

Thus, Taiwanese youth have not become proficient English speakers historically, and today this has even deeper consequences for Taiwan.

With the English language growing in importance globally, many Taiwanese parents want their children to become proficient English speakers. In response, many private language institutes opened in Taiwan. Many parents send their children to “cram” schools to learn English because they focus on communicative competence—the ability to use English in the context of everyday life work. The private language institutes (known as cram schools or “buxiban” in Taiwan) focus on communicative competence, and they employ two kinds of teachers: native speakers from Australia or the United States, and non-native speakers who graduated from overseas schools in such places as America, England, and Australia. Some cram schools specialize in a particular subject (or subjects) and they train their students to pass the entrance examinations for high schools and universities. Other cram schools comprise private language institutes. There are two main languages for conversation classes, English and Japanese, and some cram schools provide a few special languages such as German, Spanish, and Korean. Also, Taiwanese English teachers in the private language institutes drill the class in getting the highest scores on college entrance exams—Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Graduate Record Examinations (GRE), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), and General English Proficiency Test (GEPT)—and they assist

Taiwanese students in applying to schools in the United States, Australia, and England. Overall, Taiwanese parents believe that cram schools are better than the government schools because the language-learning contexts differ. Another important issue concerns how many native-speakers of English, who teach in the cram schools, instruct the English language as a second language (ESL) and to what extent they use student-centered instruction activities. Overall, change in Taiwanese English-language skills has been slow, potentially diminishing the likelihood that Taiwan can participate in the global economy.

Some believe that the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan needs to develop a more complete English language education program and to clearly define the purpose of the English language. Ellis (1994) concluded that in such a new plan “there will be radical differences in both what is learnt and how it is learnt” (p. 12).

English education in Taiwan has three important issues to ponder. The first problem is schools’ misuse of native-speakers of English language. Because foreigners’ English teaching attracts some Taiwanese parents, some public and private schools employ native-speakers of English to teach English, even when these teachers lack preparation to teach ESL. Yet though the salaries of native-speakers of English are higher than Taiwanese English teachers, cram schools hire them in order to recruit more students. The second problem is that Taiwanese English teachers in junior and senior high schools rely primarily on paper and pencil tests of grammar and vocabulary, and seldom teach speaking or listening skills. Such approaches fall

short of an adequate English as a foreign language (EFL) curriculum, which suggests the need for Taiwanese students to obtain more knowledge about oral skills and about intercultural communication between Taiwan and the United States. The last issue is many colleges and universities in Taiwan only provide an English language class for one year and its listening practice is inadequate. Overall, to better guarantee that Taiwanese learn necessary English-language skills requires better-qualified ESL teachers, better EFL teaching practices, and more in-depth language-learning experiences at college.

### **Reasons for Learning English**

This next section delineates the various factors that influence why Taiwanese students choose to study abroad. These factors include international business, the strength of an American education, the quality of the teaching of English in Taiwanese schools needs to be improved by the English teachers and the scholars because Taiwanese learners need to have English proficiency for the four skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Taiwanese students have several reasons for learning English, ranging from national economic interests to social standing in Taiwan, and influenced by increased higher education opportunities in Taiwan, government scholarships for studying abroad, to a sense that studying abroad counters inadequate English teaching in Taiwan. When Taiwan was admitted to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, official links opened to international markets. Technology and international trade require English language

competence to communicate, and share skills and experiences between countries. As Taiwan enters the global economy, many Taiwanese people require English language skills because foreign companies operate in Taiwan. The Taiwanese people, thus, have two motivations for learning the English language. The first one is intrinsic motivation, such as an interest in English or the desire for further personal development in general (studying abroad). Another one is extrinsic motivation, such as the need to speak English for work or because a parent has sent a learner to class. However, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan encourages Taiwanese people to learn the English language in order to be able to communicate with foreigners, study abroad, and have the most competitive country in Asia. Both government institutions and private enterprises seek employees with English speaking proficiency in Taiwan. Therefore, since 2003, the Taiwan MOE has encouraged universities and colleges of technology to set English thresholds for graduates. Most Taiwanese students need to achieve a level of English proficiency sufficient on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) and General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) in order to meet the anticipated needs of both domestic and international job markets.

Because English plays an important role in international business, communication, technology, education, and travel, the Taiwanese government encourages the Taiwanese people to study abroad in the U.S., and many decide to work abroad or emigrate there.

According to statistics of the Ministry of Education in Taiwan, between 1950-2004, the



number of Taiwanese studying abroad continuously increased, but this trend reversed. In 1994, the study-abroad population was about 37,000. After 1994, the study-abroad population decreased about 1,000 to 3,000 per year. In 2011-2012, only 23,250 populations were studying abroad in the United States (Open Doors: Report on International Educational Exchange). But even though many think an American education is better than a Taiwanese education, in part because U.S. colleges and universities degrees support expectations of gaining English language skills and a high quality of life, many Taiwanese people cannot afford to study abroad.

Another reason for thinking that Taiwanese higher education is inferior to the U.S. is that since 1996, many colleges that originally opened for professional training have begun to be evaluated for a change in status to become an institute of technology or a university. Unlike in earlier times, almost all Taiwanese students can now be admitted into universities in Taiwan, even if some of these Taiwanese students would not have qualified earlier. This has intensified the sense that simply passing the English-language entrance exams, which depends on almost entirely on memorizing vocabulary, is the sole reason for studying English in schools.

Government scholarships balanced other factors that negatively impacted interests in studying abroad. Since 2001, Taiwan's economy took a serious downturn, which led many Taiwanese students to change plans and then to study and learn English in Taiwan as a

cost-saving measure. This was countered somewhat when the Ministry of Education in Taiwan offered scholarships for Taiwanese students to study in graduate schools. This opportunity encouraged Taiwanese students to study abroad and obtain better English language ability through conversation.

Also contributing to decisions to study abroad is the persistent sense that English-language instruction in Taiwan is made difficult because of the wide range of learners in classrooms. With mixed ability students, Taiwanese English teachers find it difficult to teach English proficiency with such diverse capabilities among students in the same class. Hsieh (2010) noted, “a class with diverse levels of English proficiency among its students is certainly a barrier to effective teaching and learning” (p. 239). Thus, even if Taiwanese English foreign language learners have been educated in the English language from the elementary to the senior high schools and more students are entering higher education than ever before, the government in Taiwan still expresses “grave anxiety about its national proficiency in English” (Graddol, 2006, p. 95). Due to the learning environment and the quality of Education in Taiwan, Taiwanese parents have the high expectations of their children’s obtaining English language proficiency and many Taiwanese parents support their children studying abroad in the United States.

### **Integration of Language with Culture**

This section explains why there is more to learning a language than simply being able

to say the words or understand their meaning, because language is tightly connected to culture. Chen and Hsieh (2008) found that language learners must cultivate cross-culture communication skills in order to deeply understand important conditions of society and customs of culture. Taiwan and the United States are quite different, and each has its own language, which relates to its own culture. Brown (1994) explained the language-culture relationship as follows: “A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture” (p. 165). To become proficient American-English speakers, Taiwanese English learners need to understand and adapt to both English linguistics and the culture of the United States. According to Hofstede (1986), four central dimensions enter into the characteristics of culture: *Individualism vs. Collectivism*; *Power Distance*; *Uncertainty Avoidance*; *Masculinity vs. Femininity*. Chen and Hsieh (2008) found that Hofstede’s four cultural dimensions differ dramatically between Taiwan and the United States. For instance, an individualistic culture like the United States is more self-centered and emphasizes individual goals, while a collectivistic culture like Taiwan emphasizes groups and thinks more in terms of “we.” A large power distance culture like the U.S. prefers hierarchical bureaucracies; in contrast, a small power distance culture prefers personal responsibility and autonomy. A strong uncertainty avoidance culture like Taiwan has an urge to work hard, an emotional need for rules, and a fear of what is different; weak uncertainty

avoidance culture has few taboos and proves less aggressive and more relaxed. As for a masculine culture like the United States, social norms emphasize being ego oriented, having money, and possessing things; however, for a feminine culture like Taiwan, the social norms emphasize relationships and quality of life; here people are important. Understanding these cultural issues becomes important in language acquisition, because as Ting-Toomey (1999) wrote: “Culture affects communication, and communication affects culture” (p. 14). The Taiwanese people’s learning of English requires they also learn cross-cultural skills, that is that they learn how to adapt to a culture that is not like their own, without giving up their home culture.

Furthermore, according to Hall (1976), social interactions among people can be of two kinds: “high-context” and “low-context” communications. As Hall (1976) describes it, in a high-context communication “most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person” (p. 79). High-context communications express indirect verbal messages, as is common in Asian cultures. Moreover, decisions and activities focus around personal face-to-face communication and often around central situations with meaningful expectations, such as not addressing an elder using a familiar form, but instead using a form considered more respectful. In contrast, Hall (1976) describes low-context communications, writing, “the mass of information is vested in the explicit code” (p. 79). Low-context communication expresses that the verbal message is direct as happens in American culture.

Moreover, communication is seen as a way of exchanging information, ideas, and opinions. Therefore, the characteristics of Taiwanese and American cultures are opposite and quite different. The characteristic of Chinese culture emerged from conceptions of Confucius, which emphasized interdependent relationships between people and world. On the contrary, American culture emerged, in large part, from Puritanism of the United Kingdom, which emphasized individualism and liberty, with all men created equal without privileges (Chen & Hsieh, 2008). According to Su (2006), English language curricula in Taiwan have been taught using only a few cultural issues, typically focused on food and holidays such as Halloween and Christmas. Ting-Toomey (1999) argued that English-language proficiency requires possessing “interaction-based pragmatic competence” such as “when to say what appropriately, under what situations” in adapting to a new environment (p. 241). Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that learning American English requires also learning American culture. Or, as linguist Bolinger and Jones (1980) write: “[Since] language is like a loaded gun: it can be fired intentionally, but it can wound or kill just as surely when fired accidentally” (p. 14). Ultimately, language learners seem likely to need to understand and execute suitable communication models, and to appreciate (and be able to function within) complex social contexts where relationships exist between suitable communication models and group cultures.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The goal of this qualitative phenomenological research was to investigate individual experiences of Taiwanese students studying abroad in the United States. This study was to describe the “lived experience” of the phenomenon. Given the present-day economic circumstances of Taiwan, the importance Taiwanese becoming highly literate English speakers to a global economy, the interest of parents in their children’s becoming productive adults, and the common practice of Taiwanese young adults studying abroad in the United States as a way to respond to these circumstances—as well as with an eye to contributing to the conversation about English-language education in Taiwan; the purpose of this study is to perform exploratory qualitative research into the lived experiences of Taiwanese young-adult students currently studying in the United States. In particular, the goals are to understand their English-language learning history, to study the ways they developed a sense of American culture (before and during the time they studied abroad), and to investigate their sense of the gaps between their preparation for studying abroad and the demands of studying abroad.

### **Research Questions**

As I detail in Chapter Two, four central research questions guide this research:

1. How had Taiwanese students studying abroad prepared for coming to the U.S., what were their motivations for studying abroad, and how might this have

influenced their learning English?

2. How did Taiwanese students studying abroad think about and talk about social interactions in American culture, and how might this have shaped their learning of English in the U.S.?
3. How did Taiwanese college-aged students studying abroad experience the interaction of English with American culture during their time in the U.S.?
4. Then, looking back at their preparation in light of their experiences in the U.S. what might their thoughts be about their preparation for studying abroad compared to their experiences, and what advice might they give others planning to study abroad?

### **Significance of the Study**

As will become clearer in what follows, this study will contribute to understanding in new and more complex ways how better to serve the needs of the Taiwanese people, as they become proficient in the English language. To date, there have been few studies that focused on Taiwanese students learning English by studying abroad, so this study fills a gap in the literature. In addition, this will allow U.S. institutions of higher education to provide better support for Taiwanese students studying in the U.S. As Ting-Toomey (1999) reported: “Individuals often experience greater emotional vulnerability in their initial interactions with people from other cultural groups than with people from their own groups” (p. 145). Also,

this study provides useful information for foreign language educators and teachers who develop curricula with interaction-based knowledge and communication skills for a new generation of learners.

This study differs from previous studies because it will employ qualitative research about the experiences and conceptions of Taiwanese students studying abroad. As such, qualitative research allows for multiple vantage points on the research focus to emerge, and provides a forum where participants' feelings, unique ways of seeing the world and interpretations of their experiences can emerge. Using a qualitative approach meets Marton and Ramsden's (1988) sense that a qualitative study would elicit deep information and reasons for action because "learning should be seen as a qualitative change in a person's way of seeing, experiencing, understanding, conceptualizing something in the real world" (p. 271).

Chapters Two through Five complete the dissertation. Chapter Two describes the framework for performing this particular piece of research. Chapter Three details the methodological decisions, especially the research paradigm, participant recruitment, data collection, analysis strategies, and provisions for trustworthiness. Chapter Four presents the findings, attending to each research question in turn. Chapter Five contains a discussion of findings, an explanation of the myriad ways that findings from this study contribute to the scholarship used to frame (and conceptualize) the research.



## CHAPTER 2:

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter describes the framework developed to guide the research. This framework consists of three parts: 1) the experience of studying abroad; 2) the interconnectedness of social interactions and culture; and 3) critical experiences for learning language. As I argue below, studying abroad is a common occurrence for Taiwanese college-aged students and many come to the U.S. to learn English. Students' reasons for learning English early in their educations can have a lasting impact on their motivation to pursue learning English in the U.S. and some have been little studied using qualitative research to provide rich descriptive detail about their English-language learning experiences. Taiwanese students studying abroad obtain more opportunities to learn a second language (English) than Taiwanese learners in Taiwan. According to social learning theory, the environment influences the behavior and results of the learners. In addition, social interactions are necessary for learning English in a contextual way, but not knowing English interferes with having "instructive" social interactions. And though scholars discuss social interaction difficulties, little research exists to take the Taiwanese students' perspective into account. Finally, I take up issues of the extent to which substantive differences exist between Taiwanese culture and American culture, and how these differences create difficulties for learning English. Here, members of different cultures experience learning settings in different

ways, and I illustrate how this is the case for Taiwanese students in the U.S. who are learning English, and draw out the implications for this study. Let us then begin with studying abroad.

### **Studying Abroad**

Studying abroad involves pursuing educational opportunities in another country and many students are encouraged to study abroad for an advanced education. Since 1950, the United States has been the first choice of Taiwanese students studying abroad. At that time, most Taiwanese studying abroad in the United States studied in doctoral programs, and they were supported either by the government, or if they could not get scholarships, by financially advantaged families. However, in the last ten years, most Taiwanese students studying abroad enter master programs for one or two years. According to the Institute of International Education, 23,250 Taiwanese studied abroad in the United States in 2011-2012 (Open Doors 2012 Fast Facts). According to Open Doors 2012— Institute of International Education, 51.6% of Taiwanese students studying abroad study at the graduate level, 25.8% at the undergraduate level, and 8.0% are in language programs. The number of students studying abroad in the United States declined 6.3% from 2010-2011 to 2011-2012, because of the global financial crisis. Some Taiwanese students (who otherwise would have studied abroad) decided to complete doctoral programs in Taiwan because of the variety of schools, lower tuition and cost of living, and a common language. Thus, though some students choose to stay in Taiwan to study, to save money and avoid language problems, many Taiwanese

learners have chosen the United States over other countries for studying abroad. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Education in Taiwan, the largest numbers of students studying abroad are in the United States, which has more than other countries such as Australia, United Kingdom, and Canada.

As Yen and Stevens (2004) write, Taiwanese students have been encouraged to study abroad for advanced education because America is seen as the “American Dream” in media representations, because the Taiwanese hold respect for United States degrees, because the quality of education in the United States is considered better than in Taiwan, and because Taiwanese students studying abroad have opportunities to gain work experience in the United States. But all Taiwanese students who come to the U.S. must first become proficient English speakers, readers, and writers. Many Taiwanese students prefer to study abroad because it improves their foreign language skills (Freed, 1995). Teichler (2004) indicated that learners studying abroad often improve their foreign language abilities and deepen understandings about culture and society, writing: “This [social and cultural understanding] is more likely to be offered abroad than at home, and [those who go abroad to learn] are better qualified for a professional career abroad” (p. 397). However, some researchers studying study-abroad learners found they interacted little with native speakers, even if they have a rich environment for interaction (Hassall, 2006; Pellegrino, 1998; Wilkinson, 1998).

Some researchers report that learners studying abroad need to enhance their language

gains (Allen, 2010; Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Liu, 2010; Magnan & Back, 2007; Wang, 2010; Wilkinson, 1998), have more proficiency in formal English than at-home language (Coleman, 1997; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004), and need to comprehend the target culture (Allen, 2010; Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Liu, 2010; Magnan & Back, 2007; Wilkinson, 1998). Thus, many Taiwanese learners consider studying abroad for promoting English language learning and for advanced education.

Even though students studying abroad could improve language fluency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills (Amuzie & Winke, 2009), some researchers showed that learners' language abilities are impacted more during a year-long study abroad experience (Allen, 2010; Coleman, 1997; Felix-Brasdefer, 2004). Davidson (2007) suggested that long-term studying abroad based on language and culture helps learners to progress, especially to demonstrate high-level proficiency growth and acquisition. Moreover, Wang (2010) found that "absolute" beginning language learners might promote language gains in oral proficiency during a year-long study abroad experience. Coleman (2004) reported that learners studying abroad obtained linguistic skill:

Study abroad is often integrated into degrees in modern languages in the belief that extended immersion in a society where the target language is used every day will enhance the learner's proficiency, especially oral-aural skills and less formal registers.

(p. 582)

Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2002) stated that most educators asked how length of stay in the foreign country would promote language abilities, and the general recommendation is “the longer, the better” (p. 192). Yet, Wilkinson (1998) demonstrated that “increased non-classroom interaction in the target language and miraculous linguistic gains are not inevitable in the study-abroad setting” (p. 33). Thus, learners during study-abroad experiences have more chances for authentic language input and for interaction with native speakers (Wang, 2010; Hernandez, 2010), but do not always take advantage of these to the same extent.

Even though researchers find a longer length of stay in the foreign country is better, language success or gain depends on the learners’ purpose and motivation while they are studying abroad. Wilkinson (1998) found cases of failure in study-abroad outcomes and claimed, “the overseas experience of any length is too complex to be reduced to uniform promises of success and gain” (p. 34). On the other hand, Regan (1995) indicated that low-proficiency learners have more language gain than advanced learners during studying abroad (cited in Wang, 2010). Amuzie and Winke (2009) wrote that “studying abroad offers a different level and type of language input, opportunities for interaction” with native speakers (p. 366).

International students struggle with challenging academic and social life related to acculturation (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). Yen and Stevens (2004) wrote that, while

learners studying abroad have a desire to learn English and are viewed as being a credit to their families, they need to explore unfamiliar environments in the United States, which over time helps to reduce anxiety, confusion, and depression. In addition, Furnham and Tresize (1983) showed that learners studying abroad face three problems: problems of living in a foreign country; problems of affirming emotional maturity and independence; problems of struggling academically. Gu and Maley (2008) reported “the experience of a different living style and the confrontation of contrasting traditions, values and expectations can be emotionally and psychologically challenging (p. 232). In fact, some research found that international students cope with stressful life events during their time studying abroad (Leong, Mallinckrodt, & Kralj, 1990; Parr & Others, 1992). For example, Zhao, Kuh, & Carini (2005) reported that first-year international students have to deal with “academic challenge,” “student-faculty interaction,” and “computer technology use” (p. 216). However, some students studying abroad could not cope with depression by themselves, especially when faced with their academic workload, or new environment and culture. Vande Berg (2007) explained that some studying abroad learners are “admirably self-sufficient,” but some “simply do not know how to go about learning in a new and different cultural environment” (p. 394). In fact, motivation and personal beliefs play a significant role to study-abroad learners, as they have to balance the different culture between the home country and the foreign country; and they need to change their attitude to interact with native speakers in

foreign society. Overall, Murphy-Lejeune (2003) described the learners' experience during studying abroad as "a maturing process" – "rather than a total personality change, this process takes on the shape of a personal/expansion, an opening of one's potential universe" (p. 113).

Thus, given the varied preparation of Taiwanese students for schooling abroad, the importance of motivational factors, and the impact of studying abroad on English proficiency, I began to wonder how Taiwanese students studying abroad had prepared for coming to the U.S., what their motivations for studying abroad were, and how this influenced their learning English.

This, then, leads me to a discussion of the acculturated nature of social learning and implications for learning English through social interactions, when one does not already know English or the cultural context.

### **Social Interaction and Culture**

Learners studying abroad hope to make friends with native speakers, because they believe conversations will improve oral proficiency in the target language and aid in their becoming deeply immersed in the new culture. "Culture affects communication, and communication affects culture" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 14). Isabelli-Garcia (2006) identified how learners who study abroad learned the target language culture and improved speaking skills through good social interactions, and these provide high motivation. Also, Hernandez's

(2010) study discovered that “student interaction with the target language culture had a significant impact on speaking performance for the SA (study abroad) participants” (p. 660). In addition, Magnan and Back (2007) found that social interaction and speaking proficiency were related in a one-semester study-abroad program in France. As Meara (1994) noted, more progress in language development occurs if learners spend more time interacting socially with native speakers. So, Ife (2000) concluded that many learners, while studying abroad, needed to interact socially with native speakers in order to improve language proficiency and learn new ways through socialization.

On the other hand, Sakurai, McCall-Wolf, and Kashima (2010) found that international students have problems with social ties with local friends. In fact, study-abroad learners’ social networks are divided into three models: “co-national, multinational and local” (Sakurai, et al., 2010, p. 177). Co-national friendship involves international students making friends with those from their home country in the new country. Multinational friendship means that the international students associate with international students from other countries. Local friendship means that international students make friends with those from the new (target) country. According to these three social network models, Sakurai et al. (2010) indicated that co-national friends with close relationships, multinational friends with social relationships, and local friends with academic relationships helped study-abroad students acclimate to the new culture in a supportive fashion.



But making local friends contradicts international student preferences. Furnham and Alibhai (1985) indicated that international students have strong preferences to make friends with those from their home countries or with other international students, rather than from the host country. For instance, Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) found that it could be hard to establish deep cross-cultural relationships between international students and American students, because American students interact socially with international students perfunctorily. Indeed, Yen and Stevens (2004) found that Taiwanese students studying abroad have more challenges interacting with American students because of differences in social customs from their home country; moreover, when they arrived in the United States, language leads to many problems, socially as well as academically, for the international students. According to Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004), if the international students lack appropriate culture knowledge about the host country and if the international students have strong cultural identities, it is less likely they will adapt to the host culture. This is also influenced because Americans' social conversations have a more "direct expression of feelings, assertive expression of opinions, and expectations of sharing" (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006, p. 422).

Therefore, as Wang (2010) pointed out, because "the amount and the quality of interaction" plays an important role for language gains during studying abroad, developing these interactions and bridging cultural differences must be addressed. Yet, Bochner (1977) disagrees that the international students are encouraged to adapt cross-culturally to give up

maintainable co-national friendship network, and indicates that:

Mono-cultural bonds are of vital importance to foreign students, and should therefore not be administratively interfered with, regulated against, obstructed, or sneered at. On the contrary, such bonds should be encouraged, and if possible, shaped to become more open to bi- or multi-cultural influence. (p. 292)

Moreover, Bochner's (1977) model found that co-national friends could use emotional help as "general supportive counseling on a paraprofessional level" (p. 290). Thus, at the national level, differences in cultural backgrounds influence people's interactions and English-language learning outcomes (Hardin et al., 2007).

Cultural awareness and knowledge are obtained from studying abroad in the target country via communities, TV shows, society and campus. Furnham and Alibhai (1985) indicated that international students' home culture might conflict with American society, customs, and campus life, because of identity and personal beliefs. For example, Yen and Stevens (2004) found that Asian international students have to deal with bicultural conflicts "in order to achieve a balance between participating in a new cultural environment and maintaining their own cultural identity" (p. 294). Even though students studying abroad may have culture shock brought on by differences in cultural background, Montuori and Fahim (2004) believe that intercultural encounters "can provide an excellent opportunity for personal growth" (p. 244). On the other hand, as Wilkinson (1998) noted, learners studying

abroad might not gain greater cultural awareness, because “deep cultural understanding cannot be guaranteed... particularly if participants have only their own cultural perspective with which to make sense of actions motivated by an alternative and invisible set of rules” (p. 33). Many international students experience culture shock when they arrive in the target country, evident as “stress, anxiety, and feelings of powerlessness, rejection, and isolation” (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005, p. 210). In addition, Furnham and Bochner (1982) observe insightfully:

Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social discourse. These signs or cues include a thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life: when to shake hands and what to say when we meet people, when and how to give tips.... Now these cues which may be words, gestures, facial expressions, customs, or norms are acquired by all of us in the course of growing up and are as much a part of our culture as the language we speak or the beliefs we accept. (p. 48)

Assuming that learners studying abroad do not adapt to the target culture, problems may appear in social interactions with native speakers, and learners may not comprehend culture deeply enough to learn from missteps made during social interactions.

Comprehending the target culture helps “language learners in negotiating meaning and understanding the communicative and cultural contexts in which linguistic codes are used” (Su, 2008, p. 380). Robinson (1988) illustrates his point of view for culture:

Cultural understanding is an ongoing, dynamic process in which learners continually synthesize cultural inputs with their own past and present experience in order to create

meaning. As such, cultural understanding involves a synthesis between the learner's home culture, the target cultural input and the learner as an individual. (p. 11-12)

Therefore, the process of adapting to a new culture can help international students understand customs through interpersonal communication.

Wilkinson (1998) stated, "the process of adapting to foreign linguistic and cultural norms was far from a linear progression to fluency and deep cultural understanding" (p. 34). In fact, language plays an important role because culture is made sense of and learned through language communication. For example, Brown (1994) pointed out that "[a] language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" (p. 165). Moreover, Nida (1998) wrote:

Language and culture are two symbolic systems. Everything we say in language has meanings, designative or sociative, denotative or connotative. Every language form we use has meanings, carries meanings that are not in the same sense because it is associated with culture is more extensive than language. (p. 29)

Overall, the process of understanding culture is through language communication and social interaction. Ultimately, I began to wonder how Taiwanese students studying abroad thought about and talked about social interactions in American culture, and how this shaped their learning of English in the U.S.

Next, I turn to strategies for learning the English language in U.S.

### **Experiences when Learning a New Language**

How a foreign language is taught, that is, the experiences of students learning a new language, have enormous importance to the success of the endeavor. Environment influences learners as they acquire a second language. English as second language and as a foreign language have different learning and teaching approaches. Some educational scholars and teachers understand that English as a foreign language is generally thought of as a classroom learning activity, one that in Taiwan is taught almost solely using didactic teaching methods. Kramsch (2000) studied learning processes for second language acquisition and suggests that English language education such as that used in Taiwan focused so intently on grammar and translation would result in students often acquiring insufficient communication skills. But, a more natural learning environment could also be created for learners. Ellis (1994) emphasized that “the distinction between second and foreign language learning settings may be significant in that it is possible that there will be radical differences in both what is learnt and how it is learnt” (p. 12). In fact, “natural settings lead to higher levels of L2 [second language] proficiency than educational settings” (p. 215). This scholarship suggests that language teachers could create more natural settings and effective learning environments that allow learners to develop linguistic systems for a second (third or fourth) language.

In addition, learning strategies play a significant role in language learning because

they provide tools to assist learners in improved language proficiency (Oxford, 1990). Donato and MacCormick (1994) observed that “language learning strategies, like all higher mental processes, are not and simply cannot be directly taught and implemented by learners with uniform success” (p. 456). As Takeuch noted, Gao (2006) found “learners adopt different sets of strategies used at different stages of learning and appropriate strategies in different learning contexts” (p. 56). Thus, international students ultimately change their language learning strategies when they study in a new environment.

Several authors highlight the ways that learners themselves are a central part of language learning because they influence the learning of English. Oxford (1990) indicated that language-learning strategies are “specific actions taken by the *learner* to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (p. 8, emphasis added). Cohen (1998) referred to language learning strategies as “processes which are consciously selected by *learners* and which may result in action to enhance the learning or use of a second or foreign language” (p. 3, emphasis added). In addition, Weinstein and Mayer (1986) thought that language-learning strategies center around “behaviors or thoughts that a *learner* engages in during learning that are intended to influence the learner’s encoding process” (p. 315, emphasis added). In short, Rees-Miller (1993) indicated that the relationships between language learning strategies and language achievement are influenced by motivation and personal behavior, especially via autonomy

and self-regulation (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Murray, 2010). Noels et al. (2000) found that autonomous and self-regulating language learners tend to learn based on pleasure and perseverance in the target language-learning environment. Moreover, Yang (1999) wrote that learners' beliefs influence the learning goals and motivations, and then lead to strategy uses and behaviors. Thus, motivation plays an important role in learners' language acquisition.

Oxford (1990) divided language-learning strategies into two sections: direct and indirect. Direct strategies occur in three types: memory, cognitive, and compensation strategy, to which Carson and Longhini (2002) added "conversation strategy" (p. 413). Indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective, and social strategy. As Carson and Longhini (2002) report, one learner of a target language used metacognitive strategies, because of "the rich target language environment and continuous communicative demand" (cited in Gao, 2006, p. 56). In contrast, Lai (2009) indicated that language learning strategies and language proficiencies were related, because greater proficiency resulted when learners used more language-learning strategies. For example, Lai's (2009) study found that proficient learners utilized more meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies than memory strategies; the less proficient learners used more social and memory strategies than cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. However, Murray's (2010) research found that compensation and social strategies were the most frequently used, a finding similar to Wharton's (2000) study.

Yet, Wharton (2000) indicated that cultural background influenced learning strategy

use and differed for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners versus English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. For example, Tait (2010) and Wharton (2000) found that Chinese students used rote memorization more, while bilingual Asian students used more social strategies than any other strategies. Oxford and Ehrman (1995) found second language and foreign language learners used different strategies because:

Second language learners, who are learning a language in an environment where the language is the means of daily survival and communication, typically use more learning strategies than do foreign language learners, who are learning a language in an environment where that language is not the everyday means of communication (p. 372).

Furthermore, as Adams (2006) wrote: “Because educational system differ cross-culturally, it is possible that the effect of study abroad on language learning strategy use will differ by culture as well” (p. 263). Thus, learning a language depends on the learning environment of the learning setting and on the cultural background of the learner, both of which impact language-learning strategies used.

Successful language learners need to understand the cultural background for the target language, because this cultural knowledge influences the learning process. Cohen (1998) reported, “second language learner strategies encompass both second-language learning and second-language use strategies” (p. 5). Ochs (1996) explained the connection between



language and culture learning in this way:

The acquisition of language and the acquisition of social and cultural competence are not developmentally independent processes, nor is one process a developmental prerequisite of the other. Rather the two processes are intertwined from the moment a human being enters society. Each process facilitates the others, as children and other novices come to a perspective on social life in part through signs and come to understand signs in part through social experience. (p. 407)

Thus, the acquisition of the second language requires understanding the target culture in order to obtain the language applied and increase the communication skill.

According to Ting-Toomey (1999), “language infiltrates so intensely the social experience within a culture that neither language nor culture can be understood without knowledge of both” (p. 93). Thus, I began to wonder how Taiwanese college-aged students studying abroad experienced the interaction of English with American culture during their time in the U.S.

Then, looking back at their preparation and their experiences in the U.S., I wondered about their thoughts about their preparation for studying abroad compared to their experiences, and what advice they might give others planning to study abroad.

This framework intertwines learning the English language with social interactions in a cultural context quite unlike one’s home culture. As such, the framework scholarship suggests the complicated circumstances that surround Taiwanese students studying abroad in the U.S. The interconnectedness and complexity suggests that a qualitative research approach might be appropriate to draw out the variation across seemingly similar Taiwanese students,

as well as provides a way to give Taiwanese students' voices center stage in the research data set and findings.

In Chapter Three, I detail the research methodological strategies I used to carry out this research.

### CHAPTER 3:

#### METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative research strategies to interview Taiwanese students studying abroad in the United States about experiences related to learning English through social interactions in a cultural context quite unlike their home culture. Qualitative research provides the best approach because it allows seeing the world from the participants' vantage points, and for understanding the diversity of their experiences. For example, Marton and Ramsden (1988) write that "learning should be seen as a qualitative change in a person's way of seeing, experiencing, understanding, conceptualizing something in the real world" (p. 271), and an interview study provides a way to develop an appreciation of participants' world. Among various types of qualitative research, I used phenomenological research, to discuss and describe participants' experiences. Phenomenological research focused on describing several individuals' meaning of their lived experience of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Participants of this study were asked what they experienced and how they experienced the social interaction and English language-learning strategies. According to Baker, Wuest, and Stern (1992), phenomenological research describes "the world-as-experienced by the participants of the inquiry in order to discover the common things underlying empirical variations of a given phenomenon" (p. 1356). From Creswell's (2007) point of view, phenomenology "is not only a description, but it is also seen as

interpretive process in which the researcher makes an interpretation” (p. 59). Thus, this study used a phenomenological approach to describe and interpret the participants’ experience in order to understand the deeper meaning in the context of holistic experience of studying abroad in the U.S.

### **Research Participants**

Six men and six women participants in the study were recruited using a snowball sample from among Taiwanese students studying abroad in Michigan in the United States. Polkinghorne (1989) recommends that researchers interview from 5 to 25 individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon. All participants were born in Taiwan, hold F-1 student visas with full time status, ranged in age from 25 to 35 years old, and were educated from elementary schools to college levels in Taiwan. All participants can speak Mandarin Chinese language, and the English language was a foreign language. All participants are studying in a variety of master or doctoral degree programs. All participants’ length of stay in the United State ranged from six months to fewer than three years. In addition, this study divided into three kinds of groups by living in the U.S. up to six months, less than two years, and less than three years to study whether or to what extent participants have different difficulties during the different time periods. According to some studies, participants are sought who have been living and studying in the United States more than one year but no more than three years, because more language development is expected to occur in a year of studying abroad than a

semester experience (cited in Amuzie & Winke, 2009). Also, the participants of this study had not studied abroad in other countries before coming to the United States; thus, it was their first experience studying abroad.

### **Data Collection**

This study used both in-depth individual and focus-group interview methods to collect the data about the participants. The in-depth interviews offer access information necessary to interpret human experience, behaviors, and conceptions. For instance, Mears (2009) wrote “interviews offer opportunities to cross boundaries of understanding and to learn from the behaviors and life events of others, uncovering insights from the impacts of a situation” (p. 16). The purpose of the in-depth interview for this study was to explore social interaction, comprehend culture-learning and language-learning strategies in detail to deepen knowledge about the participants. Individual interviews lasted from 60-90 minutes, were conducted in a location where the interviewee was comfortable and their privacy could be maintained. Each participant was interviewed at least once, and three participants were asked to explain their thoughts and experience deeply by e-mail. In addition, the location was public enough (such as at a public library study carrel) where the researcher’s safety was ensured (instead of in the private home of an interviewee unknown to the researcher). The interview was tape recorded to ensure accurately capturing interviewee responses and any Mandarin interviewee used was transcribed completely in English.

The interview used open-ended questions to elicit detailed descriptive responses from the participants. All questions were asked in English by the researcher. The in-depth interview guide employed a variety of types of item, ranging from narrative of expression items (tell me about...), to domain elicitation items (what are all of the dilemmas you remember...), to key event items (when you think back over English instruction in Taiwan, what event stands out in your mind, describe it, what makes it stand out...) (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). The guide also included an introduction, icebreaker (warm-up), key questions, transition questions and ending (Longfield, 2004). During the in-depth interview, the researcher eased discourse and made the interviews resemble natural conversations. It is important that “effective interviewing requires that the researcher enjoy interacting with people” (Mears, 2009, p.20), and this was enhanced because the researcher is herself a Taiwanese student studying abroad, though she is also an English teacher in Taiwan.

Lastly, the researcher organized an informal focused group interview for all participants. The focused group interview was used to elicit “extensive information from a more broadly representative number of people in a relatively shorter period of time” (Schensul et al., 1999, p. 53). During the focused group interview, the researcher observed “how people interact with one another around an issue” and this allowed an “efficient way to construct locally valid or meaningful [results]” (Schensul et al., 1999, p. 54-55). The focused group interview guide with open-ended questions allowed obtaining additional information

from the participants to fill gaps, clarify issues the researcher found confusing, and rule out competing explanations and interpretations of data obtained from the individual interviews. Each participant had opportunities to speak as well as to listen during the focused group interview. The time of the focused group interview was about an hour long. Schensul et al. (1999) noted that audiotape is a good instrument to collect the data because it “capture[s] verbatim the words and emotions of the respondents” during the focused group interview (p. 99). After the focused group interview, the researcher transcribed the audiotape verbatim in English, which required translating portions of Mandarin as participants used both languages.

Overall, the main purpose of the interviews was to enter the participants’ real world through their eyes. Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) emphasized that the interviewer’s role is to “focus on obtaining the fullest picture that can be communicated of the interviewee’s relevant constructions of reality” (p. 93). In this study, the researcher followed all policies of Wayne State University’s Institutional Review Board, including obtaining written informed consent, securing data on a locked computer in the researcher’s possession, and protecting the confidentiality of research participants.

### **Data Analysis**

The transcribed interviews were coded for themes related to the research questions. The coding process enabled the researcher quickly to follow patterns in the data, both patterns of sameness, patterns of organization, and patterns of difference. Using domain

analysis organized the data according to patterns of sameness, and preserved meaning. According to Spradley (1980), the domain analysis illuminates patterns across participants. Each domain is comprised of included terms (or phrases, such as quotes from the transcripts) that each relates in a particular way (“is a kind of,” or “is a reason for doing,” etc.) to a cover term or domain name. Taken together, included terms, semantic relationship, and cover term represent a particular domain. Secondly, the researcher used taxonomic analysis to search for the ways that domains might contain smaller sub-domains and the ways that domains themselves relate to one another, or were organized. Taxonomic analysis ultimately provides an organizational schema for writing up findings (Spradley, 1980). At the final step, componential analysis provided the “systematic search for the attributes associated with cultural categories” (Spradley, 1980, p. 131), or the ways in which findings varied across participants. By working systematically, and keeping the research questions in mind, the researcher developed comprehensive, meaningful interpretations of participants’ experiences learning English while studying abroad.

### **Trustworthiness**

Following Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness provides a way to gauge the quality of the research findings from naturalistic research, or studies of the everyday world as it is lived. Trustworthiness is both built into the study through its design, and accomplished by following sound research practices during fieldwork, analysis, and writing up findings.



Four criteria underpin trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Credibility was grounded in triangulation, peer review, member checks, and negative case analysis. This study was designed to triangulate data from in-depth interviews of multiple participants. Here, having multiple participants who support a finding demonstrates triangulation of sources. Peer review came via on-going conversations with the dissertation chair, and other colleagues with appropriate academic preparation, about each phase of the research project. These conversations ensured that the researcher did not miss important information or conclusions. Member checks came primarily in second interviews of individuals, and during the group interview. And, negative case analysis (or using a constant-comparative method) came from repeated reading of data to rule out competing interpretations or explanations. Transferability concerns the extent to which findings from this research might be applicable to another site. Here, the researcher's burden is to provide thick descriptions so that readers can form their own judgments about transferability. Dependability and confirmability are ensured in this study through the researcher maintaining organized records, following accepted research practices, creating an audit trail that allows an auditor to follow information from a piece of data into the analysis worksheets and then to the findings, and finally by having the dissertation chair conduct an inquiry audit of a random sub-section in the findings.

### Summary

This research recruited twelve Taiwanese students studying abroad in Michigan in the United States. First, all participants participated in in-depth individual interview about their experience studying abroad and learning English. Second, all but two participants joined the focused group interview to add thoughts and suggestions. All interviews were recorded on audiotape and participants often spoke Mandarin Chinese. Then, the researcher transcribed and translated each interview word for word into English. Following analysis of the transcriptions findings were written. These findings are reported in chapter four.

## CHAPTER 4:

### FINDINGS

This chapter details research findings from the individual and group interviews, beginning with the participants' English language education in Taiwan, following with their experience studying abroad in the U.S., especially the kinds of social interactions participants' engaged, and closing with participants' language learning during the time they studied abroad.

#### English Language Education in Taiwan

##### **English Language Education in Taiwan**

This section examines participants' preparation learning English while in Taiwan, prior to studying abroad. The section begins with their reasons for studying English and moves in turn through what they saw as the most important literacy skills for studying abroad, through descriptions—and comparisons—of learning English in public school, private school, cram school and one-on-one tutoring, and arrives finally at their preferred approach and reasons for preferring one approach over others.

Participants cited four reasons to learn the English language in Taiwan: “society,” “personal issue,” “parents,” and “required the subject.” They also reported that their parents hoped that their children would be instructed by foreign teachers in the private language institutes (cram schools) or the private tutoring, because many Taiwanese parents believe that having English proficiency followed developing competency in the four skills of listening,

speaking, reading, and writing. Finally, Taiwanese society needs Taiwanese people to have English language skills to seek employment requiring English proficiency. Echoing policies in Taiwan, one of the participants said:

Everyone thinks that learning English is important, and everyone needs to have bilingual [skills]. In addition, learning English is good for studying and jobs in the future. Most of parents would ask their children to learn English. (Individual Interview 4)

Some participants enhanced their English language skills because of personal goals, such as “studying abroad,” “working in the U.S.,” and “obtaining the best technology.”

Focused group interview participants reported that “four skills,” “real practice,” and “practice in the English language under special conditions” were the most important in learning English. When participants discussed “four skills,” they referred to listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English. The participants suggested several activities central to these four skills: listening to all-English radio, using a monthly magazine—“Let’s talk in English,” going to the cram schools, reading more English websites, making foreign friends, and watching movies in English. Many Taiwanese learners knew that learning the English language is difficult, and to improve one’s competence meant actively seeking out additional opportunities for learning English, which are not commonly available. One of the participants said:

In Taiwan, it's very hard to have opportunities for learning the English language. ...

You need to create the environment diligently if you would like to learn it. In the U.S., you are compelled to use it. (Focused Group Interview 7)

All participants thought that English education in Taiwan failed to pay attention to oral skills for Taiwanese learners unless they learn from foreign tutoring or from private language institutes (cram schools).

Participants described English instruction in public education, often contrasting it with cram schools. Participants noted that in Taiwan English teachers in elementary schools create a curriculum focused on drills, memorizing words, and learning a few listening skills. For middle and high schools, Taiwanese English teachers emphasized reading skills, memorizing words and grammar structure, translating sentences, and writing a small amount. These activities are thought to best help Taiwanese students pass college entrance exams. Taiwanese English teachers require that students memorize many words. But as one participant noted, not all students were highly motivated to learn English in public schools:

I was not interesting at learning English when I was a kid. But, everybody learned English at that time, so I followed everyone to learn it. (Individual Interview 8)

In these classrooms, Taiwanese English teachers used Mandarin Chinese to instruct learning English vocabulary, which resulted in the students not knowing how to use the words in sentences (in the context of word use). One of the participants noted:

We always memorized the English words with the Chinese meanings, but the Chinese meanings are not exactly the meanings in English language structures and uses. Even though we understood the Chinese language meanings, the English words would have a different context in the English culture. (Focused Group Interview 4)

Nonetheless, many Taiwanese English teachers followed textbooks and used reference books to create a curriculum that helped Taiwanese students get a higher grade and enroll in the best schools.

At the university or college level, the curricula were focused on four skills in the English language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), but these were not given the same emphasis. Instead, listening and reading took precedence, because college students in Taiwan must pass English proficiency tests such as General English Proficiency Test (GEPT), Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), or Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Even though universities/colleges employed foreign teachers, their responsibilities were to teach students in the foreign language major. This meant that because none of the participants were foreign language majors, not only did they study English for only one year in college, but they had little contact with foreign teachers of English. In spite of these obstacles, some participants said that they made foreign friends and learned from foreign teachers at the language center or in private tutoring to improve their oral skill in the English language. Ultimately, many Taiwanese parents thought the future development of

their children required sending them to private language institutes (cram schools) where they would learn all four skills necessary for being literate in English.

The variety of English-language instruction in different kinds of English learning settings proved noteworthy among the participants who echoed earlier scholarship. Participants reported that public and private schools pay considerable attention to grammar structure and vocabulary memorization, because their emphasis is for Taiwanese students to advance to a higher school. Public and private schools focused on English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching, where English teachers used didactic teaching strategies, such as memorization, drill, and written grammar practice. Some private schools employed one or two native English-speaking teachers to instruct the listening part and provide students a few opportunities to talk, but as participants noted:

The high school employed foreigners to teach us once a week. ... For the foreigners' teaching, they sometimes would give us movies to watch. After watching the movie, the teacher would ask us some questions. The students seldom raised their hands to respond the questions, so the teacher would pick some students randomly to respond to the questions. (Individual Interview 7)

My school was a private school and also they had foreigners to teach English. But, the foreign teachers just taught once a week. The other time was for the Taiwanese teachers to teach English. ... Most of the time, the foreign teacher instructed and the [Taiwanese] teacher sometimes would ask students questions. So, the foreign teacher would pick some students to respond. (Individual Interview 6)

Even though private schools in Taiwan employed native English-speaking teachers to instruct listening and oral skills, students had few chances to practice orally because of large class size. If a native English-speaking teacher only has 50 minutes to instruct 45 students

once a week, then very little oral practice seemed likely to result. According to the focused group interview, one of the participants (Focused Group Interview 9) mentioned that “it’s very hard to improve students’ listening and oral skills for English teachers of junior and senior high schools; the problem is too many students in the class.” Other opportunities also did not provide robust opportunities, since some Taiwanese students’ shyness limited asking or responding to questions in class, partially because they did not know how to talk to native English-speaking teachers.

Because of these limitations, some public school teachers suggested that students attend private language institutes (cram schools) to learn English. This confirmed what many Taiwanese students and parents already believed, that private language institutes (cram schools) would give the best results for Taiwanese learners. When discussing that one of his teachers recommended learning English in the cram schools, one participant recalled what the teacher told his/her parents:

You should let your son go to the cram school for learning the English language now.

If your son did not go to the cram school for learning the English language, he could not keep up with the other students completing schooling. (Individual Interview 1)

Therefore, many parents and learners in Taiwan sent their children to cram schools.

Participants reported that parents and students expected that private language institutes (cram schools) would provide a natural setting, an environment that allowed



learners to absorb English. Among the eleven participants only one participant did not learn English in cram schools, though this participant in the focused group interview mentioned, “the cram school would give you [the learners] special conditions for learning English language.”

The private language institutes (cram schools) concentrated on a language curriculum for English as a second language (ESL) teaching. As expected, the curriculum differed between the public/private schools and the private language institutes. The ESL curriculum created more diverse lessons for Taiwanese learners. For example, there was one-on-one tutoring, foreign teachers’ lessons, and small classes to develop English listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Some Taiwanese learners chose native English-speaking teachers who used one-on-one tutoring because these foreign teachers taught listening and oral skills in English; moreover, they offered useful readings such as English newspapers, National Geographic magazine, and TIME magazine to let their students read and learn words and grammar structure. One of the participants described her learning from the teaching of a native-English-speaking foreigner:

I went to the cram school to learn the English language via one-on-one teaching. She [the teacher] also printed some reading papers from National Geographic magazine.

Teaching the words and the grammar was from the reading papers. (Individual Interview 5)

One of the participants studied English in two kinds of private language institute—one a small class, another one-on-one tutoring:

I went to a private tutoring class. One class just had five or six students. .... That English teacher would tell us a story in English. ... Later, I went to another one-on-one tutoring. The teacher required me to read novels and magazines, to write a short essay, to speak five to ten minutes in English. (Individual Interview 9)

Participants from the group interview mentioned that “increasing the reading and listening skills,” “memorizing the words,” and “watching movies and TV without the subtitles” were less important in learning English in Taiwan, because they thought these were not output [speaking skill].

They also recognized other dilemmas with learning English, especially its difference from Mandarin:

I think that English and Chinese language structures are totally different. Even if you memorize many words, you don’t know how to use them. When you use it often, you would know how to develop the English language structure as you spoke. (Focused Group Interview 7)

Participants all seemed to have started learning English in public schools, few added private schools, and all but one learned English in a cram school.

Participants thought that the English literacy skills they learned in private language

institutes (cram schools) and private tutoring in Taiwan were more helpful than the public/private schools. One participant from the focused group interview became more motivated to learn when her Taiwanese teacher diverged from usual practice. “She [the English teacher] never followed the textbook to teach. She used magazines to let the students read and gave us [the students] episodes to watch and songs to sing” (Participant 11). Many participants found foreign teachers better at teaching English in Taiwan, and described their teaching methods as more helpful and useful to them. For instance, foreign teachers paid more attention to listening and speaking skills in the curriculum. As two participants put it:

It was a small class.... Each unit had different topics such as hobbies and travelling.

Everyone needed to express their opinion based on the topics. Group discussion time had more. (Individual Interview 1)

She/he [the foreign teacher] only broadcasted the Simpson movie for us [the students]. ...She/he would divide us into some groups to talk. Each group had a chance to talk to him/her during the conversation practice; then, the teacher would check each person’s words, sentences, or grammar structure. (Focused Group Interview 5)

Such exercises led participants to believe that oral skill was the most important in the English language; but the public/private schools in Taiwan did not focus on it, because either English teachers used Chinese to instruct the English language or the English language curricula

mainly focused on vocabulary, grammar, and translation to ensure students passed entrance exams.

Overwhelmingly, even though the English language is a required subject in Taiwan, the curriculum in Taiwan did not include learning enough oral skills, this gap in their English preparation will have a dramatic impact on their experiences studying in the U.S., but first let me discuss the test required for studying abroad.

### **Preparing for Studying Abroad**

Test requirements for acceptance to programs for international students in the U.S. frame the ways that students prepare English skills for studying abroad. To study in the U.S., international students must successfully complete the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Graduate Record Examination (GRE), and sometimes discipline-specific exams, such as the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT). However, the TOEFL, GRE, and tests like the GMAT do not include an oral language skills test, which historically led many international students to forego preparation in oral English skills. Recently, the TOEFL changed to include an oral test, in which applicants speak to a machine, not a person. Thus, the oral test lacks a social interaction aspect where important cross-cultural skills are needed. Taiwanese students studying abroad typically prepared for the oral test portion of the TOEFL not through social interactions, but in a language center, via tutoring with foreign teachers, and practicing the oral test with other test-takers.

This proved to be the case for research participants as well. According to responses from the individual interviews, some participants prepared for the oral test of the TOEFL by practicing the oral skill in English with Taiwanese test-takers working together:

About the TOEFL, I practiced the oral skill in English with my friends. I had a book for practicing the four skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It had lots of pre-tests for each section. ...I found out the pre-test for the oral skill [had] about eighty questions. I and my friends used these eighty questions to ask and to respond to each other. So, we tried to simulate the exam. (Individual Interview 8)

Thus, even if some Taiwanese TOEFL test-takers could get passing grades, they often had few experiences interacting with American people. Participants reported much the same thing, that they learned the English language over the course of many years, but had little chance to practice oral skill in either public or private schools, or in cram schools. Some schools provided some listening lessons for Taiwanese learners. Lacking substantive preparation in this area, Taiwanese students studying abroad seem likely to be unable to accommodate the different accents heard among American people and as a result might feel insecure participating in social interactions, which require active listening, understanding, and speaking skills, as well as cross-cultural strategies for maintaining conversations.

### **Social Interactions in the U.S.**

Participants decided to study abroad in the U.S. to obtain the best education and knowledge, and to work in the U.S. The Taiwanese believed that in the U.S. everyone has an opportunity not only to learn what you want, but also to obtain new technology. This is in

marked contrast to Taiwan where it is difficult to learn a second professional field or other skills, because of the expense and because of societal stereotypes. In fact, in Taiwan society, new jobs need an advanced degree and many Taiwanese people possess such degrees without working experiences or professional skills. Thus, many Taiwanese students study abroad in their fields, then hope to work in the U.S. to augment their job experiences.

Many Taiwanese learners believe in studying abroad not only to obtain professional knowledge, but also to improve one's English language skills. Yet, all the participants came to the U.S. with Taiwanese and Chinese (from China) groups. Ten Taiwanese participants lived within the Taiwanese or Chinese community; two participants lived with an American host family or an international student (from Colombia). The ten participants' spent most of their time with the Taiwanese group during their time studying abroad in the U.S. One of the participants (Individual Interview 10) described his decision: "The language (Mandarin Chinese) does not have the barrier so that I could talk everything." Many participants said that they shared and talked to people from their home country, because they have the same culture background, in spite of the fact that the U.S. language and cultural background influenced Taiwanese learners to study abroad in the U.S. One of the participants said:

I felt that I have pressure for [speaking] the language. I could not express [myself] clearly. I felt that it's the different opinion between I and Americans. I found that they (Americans) would talk about the movies, cartoon, or sport. I could not understand

their topics. Maybe our cultural backgrounds are the totally different. (Individual Interview 2)

Moreover, one of the participants graduated from the department of the foreign language in Taiwan, but she too could not have substantive social interactions with the native speakers because, as she said:

I think that it's cultural difference because I could not adapt everything from the Americans' culture such as the friendship/relationship. I don't understand what the American people's opinions about the friendship [are]. (Individual Interview 3)

In sum, many participants said that they spent the most time with the Taiwanese group while studying abroad, because they had the same cultural background, language was no barrier, and they could talk about their private life and support each other.

Participants limited their time spent with local people in the U.S. for a variety of reasons. Taiwanese students studying abroad paid considerable attention to their schoolwork when they arrived in the U.S., and balanced paying attention to their lessons and research with spending their relaxing time with the Taiwanese group on the weekends. Most participants interacted primarily with local people to discuss projects at class or to do research together in the laboratory. When it came to interactions with locals, participants always did the general greeting only. One of the participants said that he always "smiles" or only responds "OK" and "right" to the Americans, because he does not understand what the

Americans are talking about. However, he would ask Americans to repeat words if he really liked the topics. Other participants interacted with the multinational and local people only a little because of language barriers and culture shock. Many participants interacted with the local people (Americans) only in school or at class doing research and projects. After class, many participants did not hang out with local people, because they were afraid of misspeaking and did not know what topics to talk about. Some participants mentioned that they do not hang out with the local people, because they found that the Americans like to drink alcohol (beer) and to talk about sports, which was not interesting to these Taiwanese students. One of the participants said:

I had the experience with the Americans of doing the project. I felt that they were so smart. In the class, if the American friends had the time, they would have more interaction with me. If no, we did not have. After the class, we did not have any interaction. (Individual Interview 5)

This finding echoes the earlier Sakurai et al. (2010) who found the norm was for those studying from abroad to have co-national friends with close relationships and local friends with academic relationship.

Social conversation proved a difficult task for participants, one that only one participant maneuvered around. One of the participants mentioned that even though she did the project with Americans in the class, she did not have many interactions with them



because she would always “listen to them talk” (Individual Interview 2). Some participants indicated that they would have more polite talk with the local people (Americans) than the Taiwanese, because they did not know what kinds of jokes American people accept and also Taiwanese felt they could not express their opinions clearly.

And, in some attempts at social interaction, one of the participants had a bad experience. He said that the local people (Americans) would ignore or become impatient with him because of his speaking slowly. He [the participant] said, “if you don’t speak English fast, the Americans people would feel you are idiot” (Focused Group Interview 9). Even though one of the participants thought that speaking fast is a method to have the social interaction with the local people, some participants thought that speaking slowly and expressing clearly are more important because they believed that it is important to let Americans (the local people) understand their ideas and realize Taiwanese students’ intelligence. Some participants suggested making friends with non-Taiwanese international students first, because they could practice their oral skills in English together. In sum, participants also suggested Taiwanese students studying abroad need to understand sports, movies, and the international news; then, studying abroad Taiwanese students should be brave and express their thoughts, and not feel nervous and unsure.

Thinking in terms of Sakurai, et al.’s three models of social networks—“co-national, multinational and local” (p. 177)—participants clearly formed almost exclusively co-national

networks. Most participants preferred to use Chinese to have social interaction with the co-national group, because it was easier and allowed them to talk more. The majority of participants spent most of their time with a co-national group (other Taiwanese people). They thought speaking the Taiwanese language removed a communication barrier and made joking and talk about private life easier.

Participants reported different degrees of social interaction with multinational and local groups. Only two participants reported the same interactions across these three groups and both said that this was the case because they depended on other people's feedback. For example, these two participants used the same social interactions with members of different racial groups, because they did not think about the language barrier, thinking their social attitude is based on the other side's feedbacks. Four participants spent more time with multinational and local groups in their schools when doing research or classroom projects, than with co-national groups. One of these four participants had more motivation to interact socially with multinational and local people. He made friends with non-Taiwanese international students or Americans in order to practice his English language. He said:

I found that if you could express your experience in English well, the American would like to make the friends with you. My Canadian friend corrected my English for a half year; then, I could express my experience in English better and better. It's very fluent [now]. So, I am accepted by those foreigners. They [the multinational and local group] liked to talk to me after my English becomes better. (Individual Interview 6)

Some participants suggested making friends with international people in order to practice the

English language, then to compare your language use and pronunciation with American people. They found this process easier; primarily because other non-Taiwanese international students were also learning English and Taiwanese students did not feel the same pressure to interact as they did with first-language English speakers.

Social interactions with locals proved a difficult situation for Taiwanese students studying in the U.S. and some participants offered advice about ways to improve these. Participants suggested that Taiwanese students studying abroad need to understand sports, and watch both American movies and the international news to have insights into topics that are common in American social interactions. These topics provide a basis for continuing conversation. Another approach—appearing agreeable, when one is unable to follow along with a conversation—was common, especially since most participants reported not knowing how to start conversations. One of the participants developed a way to open the conversation with American people:

I found if the summer ended, I would talk about the summer. When the school began about one month, I would talk about the school situation. If the winter and Christmas are coming soon, I would talk about the plan for winter and Christmas. ... It's a cycle.

That's for opening. (Individual Interview 3)

Other Taiwanese students offered advice to prevent becoming embarrassed. He suggested “explaining more details or using other ways to explain when an American could not

understand what you said” (Individual Interview 9). Another of the participants suggested a different approach:

I felt that American people have two kinds of groups. One group likes the international culture. One group lives in their own world, so that they do not want to understand everything about you. ... If you found your American friend did not [have] interest in you, you could look for and make friends with another one. If you found the American people were like impatient to you or ignore you, you do not need to be sad and you could make another friend. I believe that some American people would speak slowly and [show] interest in you. And, they would have patience to explain more things for you. (Focused Group 8)

Because of the dramatic differences in Taiwanese and U.S. culture, some American behaviors strike Taiwanese students as impolite. Thus, one of the participants suggested that “American people needed to be taught politeness” (Focused Group Interview 9), because he [the participant] thought the American people’s attitude were not good for people who could not speak English well. Throughout, in addition to several suggestions about ways to improve social interactions, it became clear that those with better English-speaking skills fared better in social interactions.

Some participants from the individual interview attempted to figure out social interactions with American people only when they felt embarrassed by some misstep. Other participants only focused on discussing classroom projects and assignments because they were afraid of talking about other topics. But some of the participants actively sought ways to improve social interactions with local Americans and to use these as a forum for learning English.

### **Experiences Learning English While Studying Abroad**

In spite of often limiting their time interacting with Americans, many Taiwanese learners still believed studying abroad promoted learning English. In the United States, the language environment is steeped in English so that Taiwanese students studying abroad seemingly have more chances to learn the English language. In fact, many participants watched television programs or joined a conversation circle or participated in international student activities for learning English when they had leisure time. However, many participants indicated that they were short of leisure time, and spent the most time on school projects and in the laboratory. In fact, Taiwanese students in the United States might also improve their listening skill in the English language because they have more opportunities to hear English than in Taiwan, but they seem to need more motivation and appropriate attitudes to interact with the American (local) people, and to find opportunities for practicing oral English skills.

Conversations offered several ways to improve English skills, but these proved not to be as fully utilized as they might. During conversations with American (local) people, some individual interview participants indicated that they “imitated” Americans’ tone and sentences in order to speak English as fluently as the Americans. On the other hand, one of the individual interview participants needed to pay attention to the key words before responding during the conversation. She said:

The listening skill is a little improved so that I could understand what the Americans said because I would catch up some key words. Then, I would think about what the whole thing was and what they [the Americans] wanted to express. Then, I could give them a response and chat. (Individual Interview 2)

In addition, one of the individual interview participants said that he prefers “to speak more, not to care [about] the correct grammar structure” during the conversation because he wants to have more social interaction with local people. But participants spoke little about having any intentions to learn English via social interaction with the American people. The participants instead imitated Americans’ tones and sentences to get closer to being able to interact with Americans when the need for social interaction occurred. In fact, some participants were afraid that American people might ignore them because they [the participants] felt that they did not have fluent English.

Lacking knowledge of the American culture further influenced social interactions between Taiwanese students and local people in the United States. All participants found that social interactions were impaired without knowledge of the American culture, especially sports. Thus, participants suggested that Taiwanese English teachers teach the English language by including American culture, to assist them in understanding the linguistics and American culture deeply. Even though many Taiwanese students thought that their English language could be improved, as could their social interactions in the United States,

self-motivation affected oral English proficiency, which in turn impacted willingness to engage in social interactions. Participants spent most of their time on school assignments so that they seldom utilized other resources, such as making friends with Americans, forming conversation groups, and taking English courses to learn the English language in the United States. Most participants needed to take one English language course; moreover, participants thought that their English language improved because these courses focused on pronunciation, presentation, and discussion.

In fact, Taiwanese students' oral English skills were weak due to insufficient practice in Taiwan, leaving them quite a large hurdle to overcome in the U.S. Many participants thought that they did not have good social interactions with local people because Taiwanese students lacked oral English proficiency and were unable to accommodate or adjust to different accents used by local people. In addition, if the participants did not pronounce words in the English language well, American people seemed to have difficulty understanding Taiwanese students' English, which resulted in reducing the number and quality of social interactions among the participants. Thus, participants in the focused group interview suggested Taiwanese students would be better equipped to study abroad in the U.S. if they were better prepared in English language listening and speaking skills.

Only one participant possessed more motivation to learn English during his time studying abroad. Lin [the individual interview 6] spent one-third of his spare time to interact

with local (American) people in order to practice oral English. Lin tried to join their activities, then to make friends with the local people while studying abroad. Lin also thought that making friends with the Americans required speaking good English fluently because American people would ignore international students if they do not speak English well. Lin described his experience learning the English language during studying abroad:

Before the school began, the school had some activities. Many different orientations opened for the students. I went to join it by myself. And if I saw the Taiwanese people there, I chose not to talk to them. I would choose the international students to chat [with]. At that time, I met one Indian. ... We would hang out together for eating dinner or drinking. This group has one American, one Canadian, two Iranians, one Indian and me... I and Canadian's relationship became better and better. So, I asked him to teach me English. I told him that I would have some problems on the English language. ... I knew the Americans would understand our wrong English. So, I would write down the wrong English. I would treat him to eat lunch once a week. He would tell me the correct way of using English language... That Canadian corrected my English for a half year. Then, I could express my experiences in English better and better. It's very fluent. So, I am accepted by those foreigners. They liked to talk to me after my English became better. (Individual Interview 6)

Lin focused on learning the English language while studying abroad. Lin in Taiwan also had high motivation for making foreign friends because he preferred to make a friend than learning the English language at class. Lin said, "I like to make friends; I would like to share my life experience or the funny stories to my friends." Lin also suggests that Taiwanese learners need to make foreign friends to learn English quickly. Based on Lin's experience, motivation and his learning attitude played an important role in learning English.

A few participants in the school joined a conversation circle to practice oral English.



The schools created some activities to give international students opportunities for practicing oral English and grasping American culture. In fact, the conversation circle assisted the international students to increase social interactions with people from other countries. But some participants spent more time doing their research or classroom projects, which resulted in having no time to join the activities of the school. According to the individual interview data, I found that participants have different points of view about learning English via social interaction with American people, but English use during social interactions was hampered by Americans' use of slang and fast speech. Participants thought they failed to take advantage of learning English via social interactions with local people, and they suggested that Taiwanese learners needed to prepare more in listening and speaking skills, as well as in U.S. culture, before studying abroad.

## CHAPTER 5:

### DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter begins with a discussion of the findings, relating results to the previous scholarship about the language-learning experiences of students (especially those from Taiwan) while they studied abroad. Then, I present brief discussions about the limitations of the study and possibilities for future research. The chapter closes with recommendations for others who might choose to learn English by studying abroad, as well as for English-language instruction in Taiwan.

#### Discussion of Findings

All participants in this study shared their perceptions about learning English, detailing their classroom experiences in Taiwan and the U.S., as well as those language-learning opportunities that occurred via social interaction in American culture. In doing so, three themes emerged: their decisions to build on their English education in Taiwan by studying abroad, to interact socially with local people (Americans), and to learn English via social interaction. In addition, they made recommendations for Taiwanese students studying abroad and English teachers in Taiwan. A discussion of the themes follows.

#### Aspirations for Studying Abroad

Students' aspirations for studying abroad varied. Many decided to study abroad because of their dissatisfaction with their English language skills. Much of their

dissatisfaction emerged from the approach taken to teaching English. Taiwan's Ministry of Education (MOE) uses an English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) approach, which differs dramatically from English as a second language (ESL) approaches. Taiwanese learners suggested that the Ministry of Education (MOE) could reform the curriculum of the English language from a style grounded in rote memorization to one that used functional speaking and listening to become proficient in English. In fact, Graddol (2006, p. 89) reported that "a public opinion survey published in January 2006 found that 80% of the respondents said they hope that the government designated English the second official language" in Taiwan. Since Taiwan joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), global economic opportunities encouraged more Taiwanese people to learn English to study abroad, work in foreign companies, or find a good job (especially one that requires English language skills). According to the education market in Taiwan, many Taiwanese parents encourage their children's learning English via private language institutes (cram schools) because of small class teaching, compared to public/private schools with 35 students with mixed (instead of homogeneous) English proficiency. Hsieh (2010) noted, "a class with diverse levels of English proficiency among its students is certainly a barrier to effective teaching and learning" (p. 239). As a result, the private language institutes (cram schools) in Taiwan serve many functions for Taiwanese learners: passing the entrance exams and GEPT (General English Proficiency Test) and TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication),

getting the highest scores in TOEFL and GRE, and having English conversation classes with foreign teachers who are native speakers of English. Many Taiwanese parents believed that the English curriculum of the private language institutes (cram schools) would promote their children's English ability to study abroad in the United States.

Cram schools provided the main location where participants studied English in Taiwan. Eleven participants (out of a total of twelve) learned English in private language institutes (cram schools) during their childhood. But the eleven participants thought that the private language institutes (cram schools) did not work, though English teachers tried to make the curriculum attractive to students by using games. This echoes the findings of Su (2006), who found that English language curricula in Taiwan have been taught using only a few cultural issues, typically focused on food and holidays such as Halloween and Christmas. This led many Taiwanese students studying abroad for advanced education, and their Taiwanese parents, to believe that the United States would be a good place for learning English.

Yet all but one of the participants spent little time with native speakers of English, preferring other international students and other Taiwanese students instead. This echoed researchers who found students who studied abroad interacted little with native speakers, even if they have a rich environment for interaction (Hassall, 2006; Pellegrino, 1998; Wilkinson, 1998). Amuzie and Winke (2009) related that students studying abroad could

improve language fluency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills; moreover, some researchers showed that learners' language abilities are impacted more during a year-long study abroad experience (Allen, 2010; Coleman, 1997; Felix-Brasdefer, 2004). Participants in the focused group interview reported that, of the "four skills" (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) in English language, to have "real practice" is the most important for Taiwanese learners. Based on the data of the individual interviews, many participants would like to work in the United States after for obtaining their advanced education. Also, Teichler (2004) indicated that learners studying abroad often improve their foreign language abilities and deepen understanding about culture and society, writing: "Thus [social and cultural understanding] is more likely to be offered abroad than at home, and [those who go abroad to learn] are better qualified for a professional career abroad" (p. 397). In fact, many participants thought that studying abroad was the first step into working in the United States.

#### Social Interaction in American Culture

Individual and focused group interview analysis found that participants struggled for social interaction with the local people (Americans) during their time studying abroad in the United States. In fact, Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) also found that it could be hard to establish deep cross-cultural relationships between international students and American students because American students interact socially with international students perfunctorily. Many Taiwanese students studying abroad in the United States do not understand the

American culture; therefore, they do not know how to converse with English native speakers. This is centrally important, because, as Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 14) writes: "Culture affects communication, and communication affects culture." Regarding the English language, there was only one participant in my study who felt no cultural barrier. My study found that the English language also proved to be a barrier for Taiwanese students because some participants said that they did not know what kinds of topics they could talk about and they did not know how to start a conversation. Moreover, the participants could not understand the target culture because of the language barrier. Su (2008) also mentioned that comprehending the target culture helps "language learners in negotiating meaning and understanding the communicative and cultural contexts in which linguistic codes are used" (p. 380). On the other hand, many participants in my study spent much time on their schoolwork and doing research or projects for school or classes. Taken together, the language barrier and the schoolwork contributed to diminished social interactions with the local people (Americans), and these interactions occurred in proportion to cultural awareness.

Based on individual interviews, many participants spent the most time with a Taiwanese group because of having the same culture and language. Many participants during their time studying abroad found that Americans liked to drink alcoholic beverages (beer) and watch sports, but having little knowledge about these activities Taiwanese students felt they could not blend into American culture. The difference between American and Taiwanese

cultures leads to many students experiencing “culture shock.” In addition, Yen and Stevens (2004) found that Asian international students must deal with bicultural conflicts “in order to achieve a balance between participating in a new cultural environment and maintaining their own cultural identity” (p. 294). In addition, using Bochner’s (1977) model of the social networks that divides into three groups—co-national, multinational, and local—provided a way to characterize the social networks of Taiwanese students studying abroad. Participants spent much of their time with their co-national group (Taiwanese people) because of sharing the same culture background. Sakurai, McCall-Wolf, and Kashima’s study (2010) also found that international students have problems with social ties with local friends. Also, Yen and Stevens (2004) found that Taiwanese students studying abroad have more challenges interacting with American students because social customs are different from their home country.

Moreover, early on for in their time studying abroad, language affects many international students and creates problems socially as well as academically. For instance, American social conversation contains direct expressions of feelings, assertive expressions of opinions, and expectations of sharing, something that differs dramatically from Taiwanese culture. It takes time for Taiwanese students to acclimate to U.S. culture. Therefore, many participants experienced a wide gulf in their social interaction with local people (Americans).

## Preparation for Studying Abroad Compared to the Experiences

All participants had been tested by the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Both tests are required for applying to graduate schools in the United States. One of the tests (TOEFL) includes an oral part, but it does not have a real person to interact with test-takers. Some participants in the individual interview mentioned that they practiced the oral test with Taiwanese test-takers working together in order to get high scores, but participants did not practice listening and speaking skills before studying abroad in the United States. Neither aspect of full English literacy is addressed in Taiwan. This left Taiwanese student participants who studied abroad ill-prepared for the demands of English language use in the U.S.

According to data from individual and focused group interviews, the participants noted that they did not give central importance to their English oral skill during their time studying abroad because they paid more attention to schoolwork and ultimately, they did not increase social interactions with local people (Americans). Some researchers noted that the relationships between language-learning strategies used and language achievement are affected by motivation and personal behavior via autonomy and self-regulation (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Rees-Miller, 1993; Murray, 2010). This too proved to be the case for the one Taiwanese student participant who sought ways to learn better oral English and engaged in social interactions with Americans, illustrating how motivation plays an important role in



learners' language acquisition.

In the focused group interview, one of the participants suggested Taiwanese students studying abroad need not be embarrassed by missteps or feel nervous and unsure. Some participants of the individual interview disagreed, saying that they experienced culture shock because they did not know which topics to talk about or they feared making mistakes. Thus, some participants often kept their mouths shut and did not interact actively and socially. This is not surprising; as Zhao, Kuh, and Carini (2005) write, many international students experience culture shock when they arrive in the target country, and experience “stress, anxiety, and feelings of powerlessness, rejection, and isolation” (p. 210).

Because, as Ting-Toomey's (1999) noted “language infiltrates so intensely the social experience within a culture that neither language nor culture can be understood without knowledge of both” (p. 93), Taiwanese student might benefit from English-language lessons that incorporate explicit instruction in U.S. cultural knowledge. Participants recommended Taiwanese students studying abroad in the United States watch American television programs, join conversation circles in their school, or participate in international student activities after their schoolwork, because these activities could assist to developing deeper understandings of American culture and also promote the English proficiency.

Participants suggested other learning strategies for English. For example, the participants said that their English teachers in Taiwan always asked them to memorize words

and grammar structure, but when they were in the United States, their English teachers asked them to do presentations and write essays. Furthermore, as Adams (2006) wrote: “Because educational systems differ cross-culturally, it is possible that the effect of study abroad on language learning strategy use will differ by culture as well” (p. 263).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The results give needed fundamental information to Taiwan’s educators and teachers of English education and for the Ministry of Education (MOE). Results gleaned from this study indicate several important recommendations for ways in which an English language curriculum might be designed to better meet students’ needs. Most importantly having substantially more instruction in and practice with oral speaking and listening skills seems likely to improve the experiences of Taiwanese students who study in the U.S.

This study also yielded several important recommendations for additional research in the areas of the Taiwanese English education system and the international student activities in the United States. Several areas for further research include additional studies in designing the curriculum of English education in Taiwan, the role of English native speakers who teach in Taiwan, the learning motivation and attitudes of Taiwanese students studying abroad, and studies of those participants who join international students activities. The following will address the above recommendations.

First, additional research is needed to further document the English education

curricula in Taiwan. The English language curricula of in Taiwan tend to focus on memorization of words and grammar, leaving many Taiwanese students without English proficiency in listening and speaking skills. Presently, there are few studies of immersion programs, programs that hold promise for learners developing language proficiency.

Second, the roles of English native speakers who teach in Taiwan deserve further research. In Taiwan, it seems that many English native-speaker teachers lack teaching experience and licenses. This raises questions about how best to use their English language skills. Additional research might study both Taiwanese English teachers and English native-speaker teachers as a way to glean the most effective practices for teaching English and to modify learning settings to better take advantage of teaching and language skills

Third, because learning motivation and attitude played a key role in the Taiwanese students studying abroad learning English, research into this aspect seems warranted. One particular aspect—lack of oral skill in English in Taiwanese students studying abroad—suggests another avenue of research that may yield important results germane to enhancing learning opportunities.

Finally, study of the international student services at universities in the United States might explore whether organizing intentional social-interaction activities with English-speaking locals might assist international students to learn American culture more readily and whether this might enhance chances to interact socially with local people and lead

to better English oral skills. Participants' experiences in this study suggest that though graduate schools provide a limited number of English language courses to international students, these courses proved insufficient for international students who live in the United States, sometimes because many courses focused solely on academic majors. Studies about international student services that provide more life knowledge lessons might suggest approaches to assist international students with blending into American culture and becoming more comfortable interacting with the local people.

More specifically, my research plan for the next few years and for the new decade is to extend my current research to answer the broad questions:

- 1) How different are social interactions with Americans for international students from Europe and for Taiwanese students studying abroad?
- 2) What kinds of the curricula better assist Taiwanese students to participate more fully in American culture and to deepen oral English skills?

Following Sakurai et al.'s model (2010), I am curious about how to change Taiwanese student participants' tendency not to interact with Americans, and if this can be changed will oral English skills improve?

### **Limitations to Generalizability**

This study had researcher and methodological limitations. Methodological limitations included having a small number of participants and being limited to one region of the U.S. In

fact, of the 12 participants who attended the in-depth individual interview, only ten could attend the focused group interview due to scheduling issues. During data collection, many participants came from among the researcher's social group, which enhanced their comfort discussing potentially difficult experiences, but this placed demands on the researcher to ensure that she delved deeply into their experiences as if she was meeting them for the first time. At the same time, two or three participants who were newer acquaintances to the researcher seemed somewhat more reluctant to tell the researcher about their experiences.

Researcher bias may have been introduced during translation that occurred at the time of the transcription. Parts of the interview conversation proceeded in Mandarin Chinese, which allowed participants to speak more fluently and with greater detail about examples from their experiences, but the subsequent word-for-word transcription in English may have lost nuanced meanings that could only be expressed as clearly in Mandarin. At times the demands of note taking during the interview limited the extent to which the researcher could also record notes about participants' feelings and facial expressions. This research difficulty could be improved by using peer review of the transcription process by fluent English-Mandarin co-researchers. Such an approach would increase credibility slightly.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The use of a qualitative methodology proved beneficial in examining the experiences of students from Taiwan studying abroad, especially their learning English via social

interaction with local people (Americans). In ways not represented in the research literature, this research made it possible to study simultaneously students' explanations of their experiences, including their feelings as well as their sense of their progress learning English, and the interactions between the two. It became clearer how their experiences learning English in Taiwan, and the gaps in their English skills that resulted, related to their experiences studying abroad in the U.S. Participants criticized the approaches used in Taiwan to teach English. Participants thought that learning English in cram schools did not work for them, and they preferred having a native English speaker teaching. Though highly motivated to learn English, participants' lack of speaking and listening skills, as well as gaps in their appreciation of American cultural practices, interfered with their taking advantage of opportunities to learn English through social interaction with native speakers. Instead, participants spent most of their time with Taiwanese friends or with Chinese people from China, because of a shared culture background and language. Overall, failure to interact with native speakers limited participants' learning both about American culture and spoken English, which seem so central to Taiwan's participation in the global economy.

## APPENDIX

WAYNE STATE  
UNIVERSITY

IRB Administration Office  
87 East Canfield, Second Floor  
Detroit, Michigan 48201  
Phone: (313) 577-1628  
FAX: (313) 993-7122  
<http://irb.wayne.edu>

## NOTICE OF EXPEDITED APPROVAL

To: Ching-Yi Wu  
College of Education

From: Dr. Scott Millis *S. Millis, PhD* **FILE**  
Chairperson, Behavioral Institutional Review Board (B3)

Date: August 15, 2012

RE: IRB #: 068812B3E  
Protocol Title: Qualitative Study of Taiwanese Students Studying Abroad: Social Interaction, Navigating U.S. Culture, and Experiences Learning English Language  
Funding Source:  
Protocol #: 1207011076

Expiration Date: August 14, 2013

Risk Level / Category: Research not involving greater than minimal risk

The above-referenced protocol and items listed below (if applicable) were **APPROVED** following *Expedited Review* Category ( #7 ) \* by the Chairperson/designee for the Wayne State University Institutional Review Board (B3) for the period of 08/15/2012 through 08/14/2013. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals that may be required.

- Revised Protocol Summary Form (received in the IRB Office 8/8/12)
- Protocol (received in the IRB Office 7/27/12)
- Behavioral Research Informed Consent (dated 8/1/12)
- Recruitment Flyer
- Data collection tools

- Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. You may receive a "Continuation Renewal Reminder" approximately two months prior to the expiration date; however, it is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date. Data collected during a period of lapsed approval is unapproved research and can never be reported or published as research data.
- All changes or amendments to the above-referenced protocol require review and approval by the IRB BEFORE implementation.
- Adverse Reactions/Unexpected Events (AR/UE) must be submitted on the appropriate form within the timeframe specified in the IRB Administration Office Policy (<http://www.irb.wayne.edu/policies-human-research.php>).

## NOTE:

1. Upon notification of an impending regulatory site visit, hold notification, and/or external audit the IRB Administration Office must be contacted immediately.
2. Forms should be downloaded from the IRB website at each use.

\*Based on the Expedited Review List, revised November 1998

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American student engagement in effective educational practices. *The Journal of*

*Higher Education*, 76(2), 209-231.

**ABSTRACT****QUALITATIVE STUDY OF TAIWANESE STUDENTS STUDYING ABROAD:  
SOCIAL INTERACTIONS, NAVIGATING U.S. CULTURE, AND EXPERIENCES  
LEARNING ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

by

**JOYCE CHING-YI WU****May 2014****Advisor:** Dr. Karen L. Tonso**Major:** Education Evaluation and Research**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

This qualitative phenomenological research investigated the English-language learning experiences of Taiwanese students studying abroad in Michigan in the United States. The English language increasingly influences Taiwanese life, since Taiwan entered the global village. Many Taiwanese parents desired that their children become proficient English speakers, so they sent them to “buxiban” (cram schools) in Taiwan and to study abroad in the United States. Learners’ choice of social networks—co-national, multinational, or local—and its impact on learning English became a research focus. Lack of awareness of U.S. culture and social interaction routines limited participants’ interactions with locals. Most participants also arrived with inadequate oral English skills and thus spent most of their time with their Taiwanese group. Because of their inadequate language and culture preparation, English (especially oral) skills improved little for most participants studying abroad in the U.S.

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

Joyce Ching-Yi Wu was born in Chiayi City, Taiwan. She studied at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey, where she received the bachelor's degree of English Language and Literature in December, 2003. Then, she continued her studies at New York University in Manhattan, New York City, to obtain a master's degree in Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in 2005. Her master thesis explored the curricula of colleges/universities and found they did not enhance Taiwanese students' listening and speaking skills in the English language. During 2005-2009, she taught English to college and university students in Taiwan. She has an enthusiastic love of teaching and brought her college students to volunteer to teach elementary school students' English after school.

In 2009, she began her doctoral studies at Wayne State University, where she received the Ph.D. degree in Education Evaluation and Research. She will graduate in May 2014. Her research explored Taiwanese students' experiences learning English via social interaction with local people during their time studying abroad in the United States.