

**Chinese University Students' Beliefs about Second  
Language Acquisition**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Beliefs about second language acquisition (SLA) have intrigued pioneer investigators for more than 30 years. However, until quite recently, most studies have been conducted in the Western school context. This study aims to investigate Chinese university students' beliefs about second language acquisition (SLA) originating from a completely different social context. This study attempts to obtain new insights of English language learning as experienced by Chinese university students within a specific social cultural context.

Two research questions were investigated in this study: 1) What beliefs about second language acquisition (English) do Chinese university students hold?  
2) What differences are there in the beliefs about second language acquisition between Chinese and Finnish university students?

The data consisted of self-portraits and their written interpretations from 81 students majoring in English, foreign language department from a university of center China. The data collection instrument used to collect data from Finnish language majors in a series of studies by Kalaja, Alanen and Dufva (Kalaja, Alanen & Dufva, 2008) was the same. In the task, students draw a self-portrait of themselves as English language learners, as well as an interpretation of their drawing on the reverse side of the paper.

The findings of the study are compared with the results of the earlier studies on Finnish students. Both Finnish and Chinese students rely on the inner

intelligence and intend to make use of learning tools in foreign language learning. While culturally constructed education, social contexts and past learning experiences resulted in the difference Chinese and Finnish students' beliefs, including different feelings towards foreign language learning, different value of interaction to people from target language community, and different foreign language strategies etc. The reasons behind the different beliefs have been explored in depth.

Keywords: Beliefs, second language acquisition, social culture.

# CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>THEORETICAL BACKGROUND</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1	BELIEFS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING	7
2.1.1	<i>Defining beliefs</i>	7
2.1.2	<i>Other constructs related to beliefs</i>	11
2.2	ROLE OF BELIEFS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING	13
2.3	SOCIO-CULTURAL APPROACH	13
2.4	CHINESE TRADITIONAL EDUCATION CULTURE	15
2.4.1	<i>Traditional Education of China</i>	15
2.4.2	<i>A history of English in Chinese Education</i>	18
<b>3</b>	<b>METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND</b>	<b>22</b>
3.1	FROM ORAL AND WRITTEN NARRATIVES TO VISUAL NARRATIVES	22
3.2	RESEARCH DESIGN	24
3.3	PARTICIPANTS	25
3.4	DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS	25
<b>4</b>	<b>FINDINGS</b>	<b>27</b>
4.1	HOW DO I VIEW MYSELF AS AN ENGLISH LEARNER: FINDINGS FROM DRAWINGS	27
4.2	HOW DO I VIEW MYSELF AS AN ENGLISH LEARNER: FINDINGS FROM INTERPRETATIONS	34
4.3	CHINESE STUDENTS VS. FINNISH STUDENTS:	38
<b>5</b>	<b>DISCUSSION</b>	<b>43</b>
5.1	IMPLICATIONS	43
5.2	LIMITATIONS	47
	<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>48</b>
	<b>APPENDIX:</b>	<b>52</b>

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In applied linguistics, or more specifically, in language education, the interest in beliefs about language learning has increased within 20 years (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003). Wenden (1998) depicted beliefs as meta-cognitive knowledge, which has undoubtedly influenced language learning processes and results.

The socio-cultural approach or contextual approach, complemented with a visual narrative inquiry, has been employed in this research. Students were encouraged to draw self-portraits as English learners and write a couple of sentences for interpretations of the self- portraits based on previous foreign language study experience. Hence, narrative research methodology can appropriately understand learner qualitative perceptions in diverse contexts in foreign language learning.

This research aims to investigate the beliefs about SLA of Chinese university students who enrolled in a foreign language department (English), to be more specific: how Chinese university students view themselves as English learners under the circumstances and influence of a traditional and progressive education system. Besides, the study offers an opportunity to study the differences in beliefs about SLA between Chinese and Finnish university students in two completely different social contexts - China and Finland. The findings of this study are compared with results from studies on self-portraits of Finnish university language majors. Moreover, the differences behind the reasons are explored in depth. At the same time, I will discuss the limitations of less traditional methodology.

The noticeably sharp contrast in the English level of students from the two countries has intrigued me: in accordance with Chinese education policy English has been a main subject, and given the same importance as

mathematics and Chinese from primary school to upper secondary school, which means Chinese students have been learning English as a second language for almost ten years. Moreover, students might have suffered from not being able to utilize English for effective communication purposes; however, Finnish students' proficiency of English, principally concerned with listening, reading and speaking is superior to Chinese students.

In chapter 2, I will discuss literature of defining beliefs from various perspectives and also some other concepts such as motivation, emotion and attitude which are related to beliefs. Except for reviewing beliefs in language learning, the literature of socio-cultural approach or socio-cultural theory and Chinese traditional education culture especially English education culture will be reviewed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 will outline the methodology section that includes a brief introduction of visual narratives, research design, research questions, participants, data collection and data analysis. Findings from data of Chinese university students will be illustrated in chapter 4 also I will compare findings from Chinese and Finnish students' data briefly. In chapter 5, what beliefs about second language acquisition that Chinese university students hold and reasons behind the different beliefs between Finnish and Chinese students towards second language acquisition will be discussed. Finally, limitations of this study will also be represented at the end of paper.

The findings indicated that Chinese and Finnish university students' beliefs about SLA varied in many different ways, however, similarities were inevitably found by the comparison of the results of two groups of data.

## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Language acquisition normally includes three basic types of language acquisition: first language acquisition (FLA); second language acquisition (SLA); re-acquisition (RA) (Klein, 1986, p. 3). The distinction between first and second language acquisition simply would be explained so that: first language acquisition usually occurs when the speaker has not been exposed with a language so far and acquires one, while second language acquisition is a learned language, which one learns after of one's mother language has yet to be completed or is still in progress (Littlewood 1984, p. 6, in Klein, 1986, p.3). As in this research, I mainly reviewed theoretical issues concerning second language acquisition with regard to the topic ---- beliefs about SLA from Chinese university students.

### 2.1 Beliefs about Language Learning

#### 2.1.1 Defining beliefs

Research about beliefs arrived in educational linguistic at a later stage, and begins with the work of Holec, Horwitz, Wenden and others in the 1980's, although, it is not a new topic in psychology and anthropology. More specifically, in Applied Linguistic, beliefs have been of interest for no more than 30 years (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003, p. 7 & 10). This recent interest is due to the shift of attention to learners and their efforts during the acquisition of second/foreign language that originated from former discussions of characterization, including components like motivation, aptitude, personality, cognitive style and study strategy (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003, p. 10). However,

the interests in beliefs in language learning have been greatly growing recently (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003, p. 7).

Pajares (1992), in Barcelos (2003) in particular mentioned that beliefs have been called a “messy” construct because of their complexity, which makes them an elusive concept to define. The reason behind the difficulty, according to Pajares, might be partly due to the paradoxical nature of beliefs and different agendas of scholars (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003, p. 7). However, it is still possible to define beliefs about second language acquisition in Applied Linguistics in many scientific ways. Varieties of ways to define beliefs about second language acquisition in many research articles are presented from different angles.

As Kalaja and Barcelos (2003) mention in their book, several terms seem to reflect different scholars and their agendas that have been employed to refer to beliefs. The nature of language and language learning referred in beliefs are stressed in all definitions (Kalaja, P. & Barcelos, A. M. F., 2003, p.8). They listed the work from Miller & Ginsberg who defined beliefs as the ideas that students have about language learning by using the term *Folklinguistic theories of learning*. They also referenced the work from Holec who described beliefs as learners’ entering assumptions about their roles and function of educators and teaching material. Similarly, in their book, they presented how other scholars define beliefs: as Miller & Ginsberg, Riley generalized beliefs, which they termed as *Representations*, as popular ideas about the nature of languages, language use and structure, the relationship between thoughts and language, identity and language, language and intelligence, language and learning, etc. However, others underscored the relationship between beliefs and behaviors, for example, the social and cultural nature of beliefs within the definitions (Kalaja, P. & Barcelos, A. M. F., 2003, p.8); Wenden used the term *beliefs*, referred to opinions, which are based on experience and the opinion of respected others, which influence the way learners act. Cortazzi and Jin mentioned the term



*culture of learning* with argumentations that what people believe about 'normal' and 'good' learning activities and processes, where such beliefs have cultural origins. *Culture of learning languages*, termed by Barcelos, illustrates learners' intuitive explicit knowledge made up of beliefs, myths, cultural assumptions and ideals about ways to learn language.

Roughly speaking, beliefs are defined as a form of thought, as Dewey (1933, p.6) argued, that covers all the matters of which we have no sure knowledge or are sufficiently confident to act upon, as well as the matters that we have accepted as true but may question in the future (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003, p.10). Hence, the contextual nature of beliefs should be emphasized in the definition which is indicative of beliefs are not merely a cognitive concepts, but also social constructs born out of learners' experiences and difficulties (Kalaja, P. & Barcelos, A. M. F., 2003, p.10). Based on Freeman, Kalaja & Barcelos (2003) pointed out that beliefs investigation should be focused on what students had acquired instead of on what they need to acquire.

Kalaja & Barcelos (2003) argued that beliefs are considered one part of the individual learner characteristic that might influence the procedure and results of second language acquisition. How language learners portray their roles in foreign language learning definitely has great impact on acquiring learning strategies and the results. In many circumstances, beliefs have been understood as inner traits, but also, they will possibly change after the different environmental learning experience.

Many prior investigators have researched the concepts about core beliefs including self-concept, emotions and actions, and some others defined beliefs for meta-cognitive knowledge as well as a dynamic, socially constructed, and situated process within contextual approach, meanwhile, the interrelations between beliefs and emotions which both of them had crucial influences on learning behaviors or actions were illustrated in previous research articles

(Aragão, 2011,p.303; Wenden, 1998, p.517; Barcelos, 2000; Wesely, 2012, p.100; Mills et al., 2007, p. 423). Based on Horwitz, Wenden (1998) pointed out that metacognitive knowledge also referred to learners' beliefs since there is no world-widely accepted difference between meta-cognitive knowledge and beliefs. Based on Alexander and Dochy, she proposed that knowledge is regarded as factual, objective information and acquisition of formal learning; meanwhile, beliefs are viewed as personal subjective understandings, idiosyncratic truths, which are shaped by a commitment which do not appear in knowledge, thus, concluding that beliefs about learning are subordinate to meta-cognitive knowledge.

According to the philosophy of Dewey (1993), Barcelos (2002) argued that beliefs are formed in a dynamic, socially constructed and situated process since individuals perceive the world to gather confidence or perceptions then act upon matters as a result of accepting it as true, even though the beliefs may be modified in the future. Other researchers suggested that beliefs comprise of three components: (1) what learner think about themselves; (2) how learners feel about themselves as language learners, or to be more specific, self-concept; (3) learning situation and target community, language & culture (Wesely, 2012). Beliefs consist of learned opinions and ideas of second language acquisition, thoughts on various issues and controversies related to language learning (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2003, p. 231; Horwitz, 1988, p. 284). In this study, beliefs viewed as internal traits, which have been formed in a dynamic, socially constructed and situated process (Barcelos, 2002) with features of dynamic, contextual and relatively stable (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003).

### **2.1.2 Other constructs related to beliefs**

Beliefs are intertwined with other concepts such as attitude, motivation and emotion. A brief review of some of the general definitions of other three concepts provided further foundation for understanding their relation to language learning beliefs. Even though partly similar themes emerged among them, beliefs appear to be totally independent from related concepts and keep their distinctive features and traits.

#### **Attitude**

Learner attitudes have always been addressed in previous studies in relation to different targets: a) attitudes towards learning situation and b) attitudes towards target community (Wesely, 2012; Krashen, 1981, p. 9). Gardner (2007) states that attitudes towards learning situation often encompass the educator, and the utilization of educational techniques as well (Wesely, 2012). Yashima (2009) addressed the attitudes towards target community in his previous work, and developed the idea into the notion of “international posture,” roughly equivalent to integrativeness by Gardner, which tried to capture a tendency to relate oneself to the international community instead of specific second language learning groups. Yashima (2009) defined “international posture” as the way students viewed themselves as “connected to the international community, with concerns to international affairs and readiness to interact or communicate with people from the target community” (p.115)

#### **Motivation**

Motivation is a very convenient way of talking about concepts which normally may be regarded as a vital human characteristic (Dörnyei, 2001, p.6) instead of a trait (Gardner, 2007, p.11), but motivation for language learning is a more complex phenomenon with many facets than merely learners desiring to learn

the language (Gardner, 2007; Brophy, 2013), as Dörnyei (2001) stated, “motivation is an abstract, hypothetical concept that we use to explain why people think and behave as they do” (p. 1). Thus, a specific simple definition of motivation is impossible to demonstrate, except by listing examples of motivated individual: is goal directed, expends efforts, is persistent, is attentive, has desire, exhibits positive affect and demonstrates self-confidence (self-efficacy) etc. (Gardner, 2007, p. 10).

Gardner’s (2007) research has always contended that there were two vital types of motivation that should be seriously considered when referring to second language acquisition: distinction between language learning motivation and classroom learning motivation. Language learning motivation, Gardner (2007) referenced relevant researchers’ work, has been considered in the socio-educational model of second language acquisition, the social context model, the self-determined models, the Willingness to Communicate model, and the extended motivational framework. Motivation is relatively stable, but on the other hand, like beliefs, it is changeable under certain conditions (Gardner, 2007; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003).

## **Emotion**

Beliefs have been intertwined with emotions and both of them play fundamental and important roles in foreign language learning (Aragão, 2011, p. 302). Emotions are indicative of movements, while beliefs in a sense of guiding the ways how human being move in the society (Booth & Pennebaker, 2000; Aragaõ, 2011, p. 302). Moreover, beliefs as a dynamic cognition can affect actions and condition understanding; but on the other hand, emotions can be identified as a bodily disposition in relation to a dynamic environment, which can possible change actions (Booth & Pennebaker, 1996, 2000; Barcelos, 2000, 2001, 2004; Aragaõ, 2005, 2011, p. 302 and p. 303).

## **2.2 Role of beliefs in language learning**

In research literature, the influence of language learning beliefs on SLA has been discussed from different viewpoints. In the sociocultural framework, beliefs may enhance or inhibit a learner's actions or behavior, as well as perceptions, including strategy use, attitude and motivation, by turning into mediational means (Alanen, 2003; Barcelos, 2000, 2003). Beliefs are significant in that the learner will hold them to be true and use them as a guide to interpret their learning experiences and actions (Rubin, 1975).

## **2.3 Socio-cultural approach**

A great number of contemporary studies on beliefs about SLA draw on socio-cultural theory and tend to view these beliefs as variable and dynamic rather than static and stable (Barcelos, 2002; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003). Also, the formation and development of beliefs (metacognitive knowledge) fluctuates over short periods in an individual's life which means the same person can hold different beliefs about the same SLA related aspect at different time (Peng, 2011). Besides, in accordance with the definition provided by Jarvis (2006), beliefs can be defined as a part of culture and culture is in itself about the knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, values and emotions that have been added to the biological base of human kind. Mehan (1984) suggested that the distinctive value systems of cultural group stems from its own cultural, national, geographical, racial and religious beliefs, which ultimately sharpen the individuals' aspirations and achievements. Thus, different beliefs about SLA between Chinese and Finnish university students can be addressed to different sociocultural contexts - Asian versus Nordic European cultural background.

Socio-cultural theory (SCT) in the field of applied linguistics and foreign language development research stems from the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky and is known as Vygotskian cultural historical psychology (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Ganem-Gutierrez, 2013). In Vygotsky's theory of mind, which is centered around integrating cultural mediation forms into taking part in social activities have crucially influenced the understanding of human mental functioning (Ganem-Gutierrez, 2013). Ganem-Gutierrez (2013) also pointed out, based on Vygotsky's methodological argument, the necessity on investigating individuals as socio-cultural beings; in other words, consideration must be given to the context of their history to better understand them as individuals.

From a SCT perspective, learning a foreign language (L2) or acquiring second language was seen as the growing ability to employ a new language as a mediational tool in order to be engaged in social activities (Ganem-Gutierrez, 2013). Mediation, one of the core concepts in SCT theory, reflects on the application of Vygotskian theory to SLA (Ganem-Gutierrez, 2013). Mediation is explained by Lantolf & Thorne as the "process of humans regulating the world or own and each other's activity socially and mentally by acquiring culturally constructed artifacts and concepts, and participating in activities". Language is not only a cognitive tool for individuals during social processes (Ohta, 2000), but also an essential regulatory means in the mediation process (Ganem-Gutierrez, 2013). Furthermore, second language development was understood as the ability to take advantage of the new language to mediate either communicative or mental activity (Ganem-Gutierrez, 2013). Beliefs are, as Alanen (2003) suggests, another type of mediational means that learners can use as a resource during L2 development.

Ohta (2000) pointed out in her works that learning from the perspective of Vygotsky, was strongly related with social activity, "learning is socially situated," which is impossible to isolate from social context. She argued

further that a social setting was the first place where learners acquire language and finally learners will have the ability to conduct themselves independently. Second language constructs such as, vocabulary, syntax and rules etc. applied through social interaction can appear on two psychological levels: inter-psychological or a 'between people context', which is prior to an intra-psychological or mental level (Ohta, 2000). Language either plays a role in linking these two psychological planes or it mediates social activities on an inter-psychological plane and cognition on intra-psychological plane (Ohta, 2000).

## **2.4 Chinese traditional education culture**

### **2.4.1 Traditional Education of China**

China, with its geographical size, has been civilized for more than 5,000 years, with its powerful economic prosperity, and advanced culture (Lin, 1943, p.3). A nation's economy might diminish over time; however, cultural heritage cannot be eroded, but culture can continue to civilize a whole society, which can influence the world.

It has been demonstrated that the relationship between culture and education is intertwined, or to be more specific, interactive. Likewise, traditional Chinese culture, manifestly, has impacted on various aspects of society: national policy, economy, or as Gu (2006) mentioned in his research, the educational tradition of China. This thesis concentrates mostly on the educational tradition of China; thus, I mainly review former scholars' work in order to comprehend the educational tradition of China by understanding traditional Chinese culture.

A traditional education in China is a component of and has been shaped by traditional Chinese culture (Gu, 2006, p. 169). Since China's early history, its

education policy started to be a responsibility under national supervision and it has been highly prioritized because of the survival and stable nature of a nation (Gu, 2006). Hence, the educational content abounded in ancient China, which can be represented in the so called “six arts” of national studies in the western Zhou Dynasty. These “six arts” included: rites, music, archery, chariot-driving, calligraphy and mathematics (Gu, 2006). However, Confucian classics were a privileged educational content under Han Emperor Wu’s decree that “all schools of thoughts except the Confucian doctrine shall be proscribed” in Chinese: “罢黜百家，独尊儒术” (Gu, 2006, pp. 170; Yang, 1993, pp. 212). Therefore, Confucianism, in terms of its educational values to what and how it taught, has been measured as the center of traditional Chinese culture (Gu, 2006, pp. 169).

Confucian culture naturally devoted unquestionable attention to the national educational foundation, which demonstrated the priority of a nation's founding and people’s governance (Yang, 1993, p. 211; Gu, 2006, p. 170). The value of education has been frequently discussed and sincerely believed by the whole society as the result of establishment and flourish of an imperial civil service examination for scholar selection to take up political and civil office, which allowed common people to gain the opportunity to change their social position and status by working hard on learning and defeating competitors (Gu, 2006, p. 171; Yang, 1993, p. 212). It stated that education is the basic building block to the nation and individuals, whose goal is to make exploration with aims to comprehend and cultivate one's moral characters, hoping to govern the nation and the world (Gu, 2006, p. 171).

To some extent, Confucianism has been not only the essential Chinese traditional culture, but also the dominant education policy in China for more than 2,000 years. Confucianism, as a core traditional education, has been bearing several brilliant educational doctrines distilled by Confucian scholars’ teaching experience (Yang, 1993, p. 212). First of all, educational values



concentrate on moral ethics (Gu, 2006, p.172, pp.176). Gu (2006) argued that Confucian education emphasized morality with a standpoint that “rulers should rule by means of virtue” which in accordance with the requirement of moral education centered on a patriarchal society. Secondly, sages, men of virtue and cultivation were embedded in Confucian education (Gu, 2006, p. 173). In ancient China, sages and men of virtue were esteemed as perfect personalities, so Confucianism advocated all society members should stress on pursuit of ideal characters along with its greatest educational goal of cultivating sages and men of virtue (Gu, 2006, p. 173, Yang, 1993, p. 212). Thirdly, four books and five classics were the dominant content of Confucian education. Fourthly, education without discrimination (有教无类 in Chinese): pioneering advocates of Confucianism recommended rendering education to all people without the consideration of gender, ages and social status (Gu, 2006, p. 185), so that was the reason why Confucius himself taught 3,000 plus students with ages ranging from 3 to over 60 years old. Fifthly, principles of teaching students in accordance with their aptitude (因材施教 in Chinese): Confucius applied different teaching methods for students who are eligible for various abilities such as governance, public speaking or moral accomplishments (Gu, 2006, p. 188; Yang, 1993, p. 214). Sixthly, teaching methods employed both learning and thinking (思学并重教学 in Chinese): the importance of thinking has been well-emphasized in Confucianism as pointed out that “learning without thinking leads to confusion, thinking without learning ends in danger “ (学而不思则罔，思而不学则殆 in Chinese; The Analects of Confucius: Weizheng) (Gu, 2006, p. 189; Yang, 1993, p. 214).

Li & Wegerif (2014), referring to Flowerdew, Nelson, and Oxford, argued that Confucianism heavily has impacted educational culture, which is valued as the core of traditional Chinese pedagogy. Traditional Chinese pedagogy, also known as scholastic pedagogy with two explicit characteristics: first, rote learning was the method concerning basic education and imperial examination which students began to learn how to write an essay without understanding

learning content and more importantly, questioning authority (Gu, 2006, p. 178; Li &Wegerif, 2014, p.22). Second, concentrating on the reproduction of knowledge through repetition instead of learning process, which means students only mastered the facts but not the reasons (Gu, 2006, p. 178; Li &Wegerif, 2014, p.22). Gu (2006) referenced the thoughts of Dong (1991) that a well-known educator named Tao Xingzhi criticized this education as a “lifeless” education in which “both teachers taught and students learnt the lifeless stuff desperately.” Chinese traditional education is, in large, described as rote learning and memorizing and repeating in terms of students’ passive, deficient of creative thinking and obedient to an authoritative nature (Li &Wegerif, 2014, p.23). Based on Thogersen, Gao (2010) pointed out that the influences of civil service exams and traditional education remains strong regardless of the social, political, economical and cultural reformation over last past 100 years, even though it had been abolished at the start of 1900s in China. Competitive academic activities, especially in the last few years have mainly resulted from increasing expansion of higher education and the commercialization of education (Gao, 2010, p. 36).

#### **2.4.2 A history of English in Chinese Education**

The controversies and debates concerning learning English and language teaching dates back to late Qin dynasty, 1644-1912, when the British, American and other empires sought access to China's markets and sent religious missionaries to Chinese (Adamson, 2004, p.21). Foreign languages in China, which has a long history, have not been ascribed a significant role in many aspects in relation to the nation's economy and politics (Adamson, 2004, p.21).

Nevertheless, the status of foreign languages, especially English, has recently been emphasized and promoted mostly in educational field --- for example, in the curriculum of primary, secondary and tertiary education (Adamson, 2004, p.21). Especially in Republic period, English was enhanced in China's modernization strive in terms of the growth of status, increased opportunities for English study and the decrease of incidences of violent anti-foreignism (Adamson, 2004, p.32). Western advanced technology, developed society, cultural diversities and one of the languages – English – has managed to become the *lingua franca*, have always intrigued China (Boyle, 2000, pp. 14).

Foreign language teaching, with English in particular, has been ascribed a prominent role in education after the establishment of People's Republic of China in 1949 (PRC) because it is a communicative tool with a versatile nature, which can facilitate a quicker path to advanced modern technology and science, and at the same time, it has prompted greater communication between the PRC and English speaking countries (Cowan, Light, Mathews & Tucker, 1979, p.466). Therefore, a minor revolution in education took place in China: the Ministry of Education not only issued guidelines for English textbook compilers, recommending the integration of cultural materials on English speaking countries, but also accepted English as an obligatory part of colleges and universities entrance exams in the late 1950s and 1960s; new teaching materials appeared where listening and speaking skills were prominent (Boyle, 2000, p. 15); foreign language schools were established (Lam, 2002, p. 246) and graduates reading English expanded (Chang, 2006, p. 517).

However, English teaching was practically discontinued during China's Cultural Revolution phase (from 1966 to 1976) whose main attack targets were capitalism and imperialism, with which English and foreigners was strongly associated (Adamson, 2004, p.127; Lam, 2002, p. 245). English teaching and foreign language teachers were banned from education, often branded as foreign agents, with some suffering torture and eventual death (Adamson, 2004,

p. 127; Boyle, 2000, p. 14). As Dow (1975) described the situation during the culture revolution that all classes were stopped with the spread of Mao Tse-Tung's thoughts from worker's propaganda, and students were eager to be engaged in participating in criticism and debate as well as exchanging revolutionary experience by traveling all around the country.

Boyle (2000) argued that China originally wanted to be independent of the west and tried every means to avoid deliberate contact, because it may have resulted in culture contamination, ideological confusion and political instability. Apparently, national policy and Mao's political movement inevitably impacted upon English in schools and universities, and also influenced the societal attitude and perception towards English; for example, questions like should I learn English or not? How does it benefit my future?

The status of English learning or teaching, experienced a rapid ascent, however, currently it has been embracing its supremacy as the main foreign language, occupying the attentions of the Chinese population with over three hundred million actively engaged in the job of learning English (Boyle, 2000, p. 14; Lam, 2002, p. 245). English language, which faces a rapid globalization and liberal economy has been regarded as the most functional means of reconnection between China and international forums, and as a resource for economic prosperity (Gao, 2010, pp. 34-35). English was given priority again in education on a par with Chinese and mathematics after an important conference on foreign language teaching held by the Ministry of Education in 1978, and has been restored as a compulsory subject in the university entrance exams from the early 1980's (Boyle, 2000, p. 15; Lam, 2002, p. 247). Besides, the Chinese government started to participate in a variety of international organizations, for example, World Trade Organization (WTO), and Beijing's bid to host Olympic Games projected a giant growth and breakthrough in commerce and international recognition (Lam, 2002, p. 247).

Therefore, Chinese people were even more open-minded to external influences after the demand of social and academic English increased with the opening-up policy where scholars were permitted to study abroad (Boyle, 2000, p. 15; Lam, 2002, p. 247). A series of actions and demands have been taken into consideration to meet the desire for learning English: more academic books from abroad, diverse opportunities for academic exchange offered, more qualified language teaching materials needed to train, and more funds for learning materials and facilitates must be found (Lam, 2002, p. 254). In tertiary education, the number of students studying English has increased in foreign language institutions creating fierce competition by tens of thousands of students with its popularity, resulting in students' enrolment in campus increasing dramatically (Chang, 2006, p. 517).

### **3 METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

The present study is intended to investigate the beliefs of Chinese university students majoring in English with regards to second language acquisition (SLA). The research data were collected mainly by using visual narrative, to be more specific, students were asked to draw a self-portrait depicting their previous English learning experience and to provide an interpretation of the same. The divergence of influence of various mediational means within Chinese cultural background can be discovered in this way.

#### **3.1 From oral and written narratives to visual narratives**

As Kalaja, Dufva and Alanen (2013) point out, in applied linguistics, or to be more specific, in language learning and teaching, it has been widely accepted that learners tell stories to make sense of their experience and construct identities discursively. Storytelling has gradually been interpreted as narratives. According to Kalaja, Dufva and Alanen (2013), based on Johnson and Golombek, narratives served as an important mediational means in teacher education, or professional development and teaching practices, which can extend to language learning or to learners' ability to grasp a second language (Kalaja, Dufva & Alanen, 2013). The definition of narratives has been extended to the visual mode so that narratives are basically represented in two mainstream forms—Oral and written narratives and visual narratives (Kalaja, Dufva & Alanen, 2013). In the context of learning and teaching English as second language, oral and written, compared with visual narratives has been studied roughly for past 15 years (Kalaja, Dufva & Alanen, 2013).

There are huge manifested differences between oral and written narratives and visual narrative: language is essential and inevitable when learners depicting language learning experience, which is audible; however, pictures or photographs are another representation of visual narratives (Kalaja, Dufva & Alanen, 2013; see Nikula & Pitkanen-Huhta, 2008 and Menezes, 2008).

Drawing human figures or self-portraits is a form of visual narrative that language learners use to depict learning experience and a procedure on a contextual approach. Interestingly, this method evolved from a book about children's drawings published by an art critic back to 1870's (Kalaja et al., 2008). However, visual narrative of data collection has proven to be of great value even though so far it has been used rarely (Kalaja et al., 2008; Kramsch, 2003; Menezes, 2008).

There are four projective uses for human figure. Drawing human figures or self-portraits is a form of visual narrative that language learners use to depict learning experience and a procedure on a contextual approach. Interestingly, this method evolved from a book about children's drawings published by an art critic back to 1870's (Kalaja et al., 2008). However, visual narrative of data collection has proven to be of great value even though so far it has been used rarely (Kalaja et al., 2008; Kramsch, 2003; Menezes, 2008). According to Kelpsch (1982), visual narratives, drawings in particular, can be used to make visible some of the drawer's feelings and thoughts, especially when the drawer is a child. There are four uses for human figure drawings of children, but is also suitable when it moves from children to adults: a) as a measure of personality; b) as a measure of self in relation to others; c) as a measure of group value; d) as a measure of attitude. Kelpsch (1982, pp. 12-13) suggests that drawings can be used to collect information about how the drawer views himself within a particular groups well as his attitudes towards different peoples such as teachers, friends etc.

### 3.2 Research design

In this inquiry, the visual narrative method was used in accordance with the method used in Kalaja et al. (2011) to conduct an experimental investigation on Chinese university students' beliefs about SLA.

There are four reasons in opting for the visual narrative methodology of data collection: first of all, drawings of human beings were novel and innovative since it has been merely used for educational research purposes; secondly, this is a comparative study of two groups of students, data of Chinese students has to be identical with the previous data of Finnish students which has been collected by visual narratives; thirdly, visual narratives give participants more freedom and autonomy with less external control comparing with conventional questionnaires such as Likert scale choices, which means participants are left spacious room to elaborate their thoughts; finally, this study is focused on socio-cultural and contextual approach, narrative research methodology can appropriately understand learner qualitative perceptions in diverse contexts in foreign language learning.

The visual narrative instruments for Chinese participants were identical to Finnish students, and comprised two sections: 1) Drawing self-portraits as an English learner on a sheet of paper and explanation of the self-portraits on the reverse side; 2) Open-ended questions about previous English language learning experience were included. The authorized teacher provided explicit explanations for the instruments in order to ensure all the participants comprehend the questions correctly.



Two research questions have been investigated in this study: a). What beliefs about second language acquisition (English) do Chinese university students hold? b). What are the differences in beliefs about second language acquisition between Chinese and Finnish university students?

### **3.3 Participants**

The participants were Chinese first year university students with English as a major subject (N=81). Their age ranged from 18 to 23 years old and 95% of them were females. Most of them have been learning English as a foreign language for about ten years This was in accordance with Chinese Education Policy where English is a compulsory subject from primary school (3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

The data was kept confidential since the data collection was anonymous (students were only asked to write down English names and ages). In addition, the teacher who conducted the data collection posted the original paper files back to Finland from China.

### **3.4 Data collection and analysis**

I contacted one of my former professors who agreed to help with data collection from the selected Chinese university, since I was unable to collect data personally during my master degree study period in Finland. I requested her to provide some small treats like candies or chocolates for participants as small prizes in order to improve participation.

In order to avoid conflicting with students' class schedule, my former professor required the whole class students to fill in the questionnaires after her linguistics lecture. However, the students had complete freedom to answer the questionnaire, which means, students made their own decisions in participating in the data collection. As with all research, the conductor obligated participants to complete the task 1 and task 2 within a maximum of 40 minutes before leaving to improve the reliability and accuracy. They were free to leave the classroom when they had completed the task. The data collection was done in one sitting. After all the data has been collected, my former professor posted the original paper forms back to Finland.

Students were asked to draw a picture of themselves as English learners (TASK 1) on an A4 sheet with a title "self-portrait" (in Chinese: 我的自畫像) that was provided within the 40 minutes maximum. The drawing is at the top and an explanation "This is how I look as a language learner" (in Chinese: 這是我作為英語學習者的樣子) at the bottom. Creativity and imagination were welcomed in drawing self-portrait. Interpretations of self-portrait with a couple of sentences on the reverse side are required (TASK 2). In other words, students were encouraged to tell what they have drawn in their own words in order to help the researchers in analyzing the drawings. Besides, students were informed that answering open-ended questionnaires comprised task 1 and task 2 with a total of 6 questions on an A4 sheet with a few sentences by recalling the previous language learning experience from elementary school to upper secondary school studying period. These answers were excluded from the data analysis and were not part of this study.

Data analysis was conducted in a qualitative fashion focusing on what drawings contained in addition to the learner him-or herself; that is, any other people (teachers, peers, or parents) or objects (books, TV, or computers) which would be interpreted as meditational means the language learner used for SLA.

## 4 FINDINGS

The data analysis employed the similar instructions from the previous research on beliefs about second language acquisition of Finnish university students who were enrolled in foreign language department by Kalaja, Dufva and Alanen in 2005. In section 4.1, the findings from the self-portraits will be discussed: the first rule for data analyzing was to identify if there were other persons standing together with the main figure in the drawing. Secondly, the presence of mediational artifacts such as books or printed materials e.g. newspapers and magazines and also other technical equipment including computers, TV sets and MP3 etc. In section 4.2, I will carefully investigate the narratives the participants had written for interpretation of their self-portraits as foreign language (English) learners on the reverse side of the task sheets. The participants' explanations were originally in Chinese but they have been translated into English by the author. Emotions were taken inevitably into consideration since it frequently integrated in participants' drawings in forms of a smiling/sad face or a face exhibiting both, in conveyed learning beliefs.

### 4.1 How do I view myself as an English learner: findings from drawings

In section 1, I first observe whether the participants drew themselves alone or with other people during the English learning process in the self-portraits. Only two copies of the data depicted themselves with others in the self-portraits (more details see Table 1.1).

*Table 1.1 Mediation means in the self-portraits drawing in English language learning*

	With		Without	
	N	%	N	%
Other people	2	2.4	79	97.6
Books	32	40	49	60
Other media	15	19	66	81

As shown in the table, the majority of the students (97.6%, n=79) drew themselves standing alone in the task sheets without other people. Likewise, Kalaja, Dufva and Alanen (2013) mentioned in their article, this signaled that individuals study without others involved in their second language acquisition. There was a large variation in the way they depicted their self-portraits: some students had drawn a very standard human-like figures with details (whole body or half of the body) as showed in Figure 1.1, while a large portion of others, stick figures or simple faces. The size of the figures was also different among those standing alone self-portraits. The standard human-like figures were normally larger than stick figures and were located in the center of the sheets. However, among these standing alone pictures, a female human-like figure, with a commercial proposal in hand and the symbol of XXX Ltd. company in the right corner, from the interpretation of the reverse side of the drawing supplementary explaining the drawer's blueprint of a future occupation in international business, thus the language related occupations were demonstrated on these pictures.

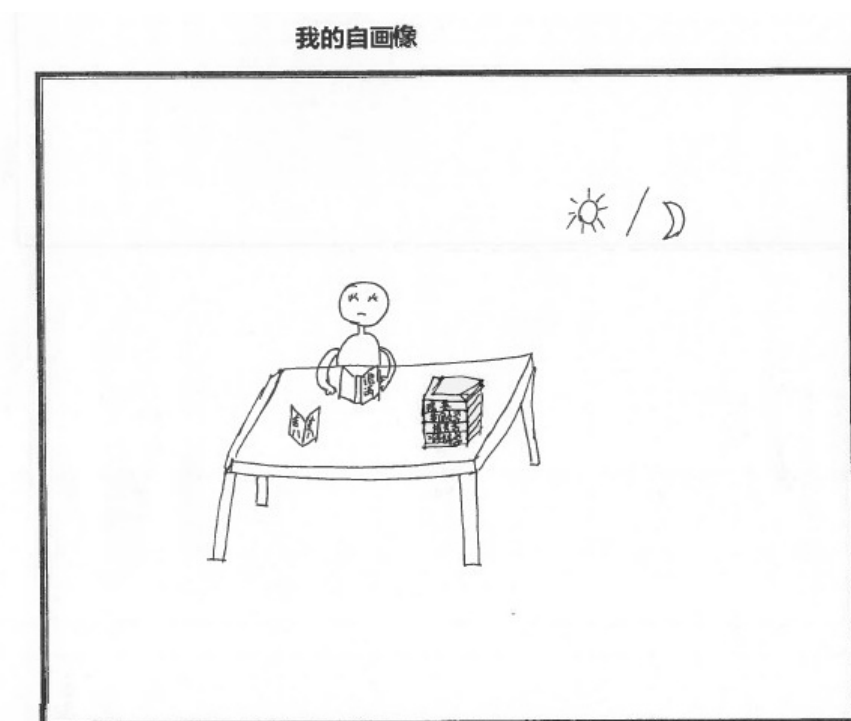


*Figure 1.1 A second language learner alone*

Only two students drew their portraits with other human figures that might be either students or other peers; one portrayed two people shaking hands with a Statue of Liberty on the top left hand corner and the White House on top. While another visualized a stick-like human figure holding a book in a hand and other two same figures talking on the top. Finally, 10 drawings had no human figures at all, but only with mediational artifacts like printed materials mainly focused on tertiary study textbook (linguistics, grammar and literature books) or technical equipment, which is indicative of the importance of and emphasized on mediational tools utilization.

However, the utilization of mediational artifacts, as I have mentioned above, mainly focused on two distinct aspects (Figure 1.2): technology equipment --- computers and CD player (19%), and books --- textbooks and dictionaries, but television was absent from all drawings. Books were covered either with Chinese or English titles, placed on desks, bookshelves, in the hands of human-like figures or alone in the sheets of drawings. Linguistics theory, British & American Literature, vocabulary handbooks and grammar exercise books appeared most frequently. A high percentage of participants highlighted

the importance and non-alternative role of textbooks and dictionaries, which implied examination-centered pedagogy involved in foreign language teaching at tertiary education and students' pursuit of academic achievement with a focus on academic scores. Alternatively, except for the traditional study efforts from normal classes everyday, they drew themselves with the dormitories as the setting, employing the use of computers for English learning activities through watching English movies and listening to English songs, which seem more attractive outside the classroom. Surprisingly, none of them attempted to represent the television in the self-portraits.

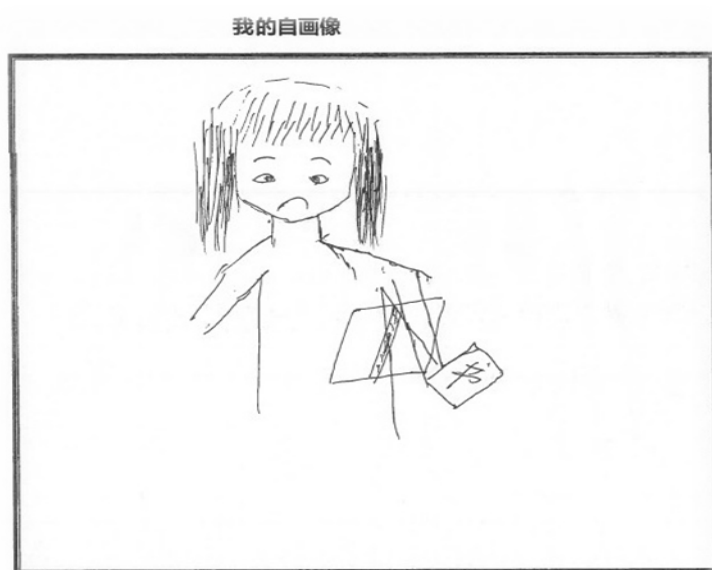


*Figure 1.2 A second language learner with textbooks*

Another interesting phenomenon from the pool of data was emotion. Emotion was inevitably involved in language learners depicting their self-portraits as English learners. Plenty of drawings (28%) with facial expressions were prominent in terms of happiness and sorrow in those self-portraits (Figure 1.3 & Figure 1.4). The 16 copies of portraits bore a smiling face, while another 7 students depicted themselves with an ambivalent face (both happy and sad, or

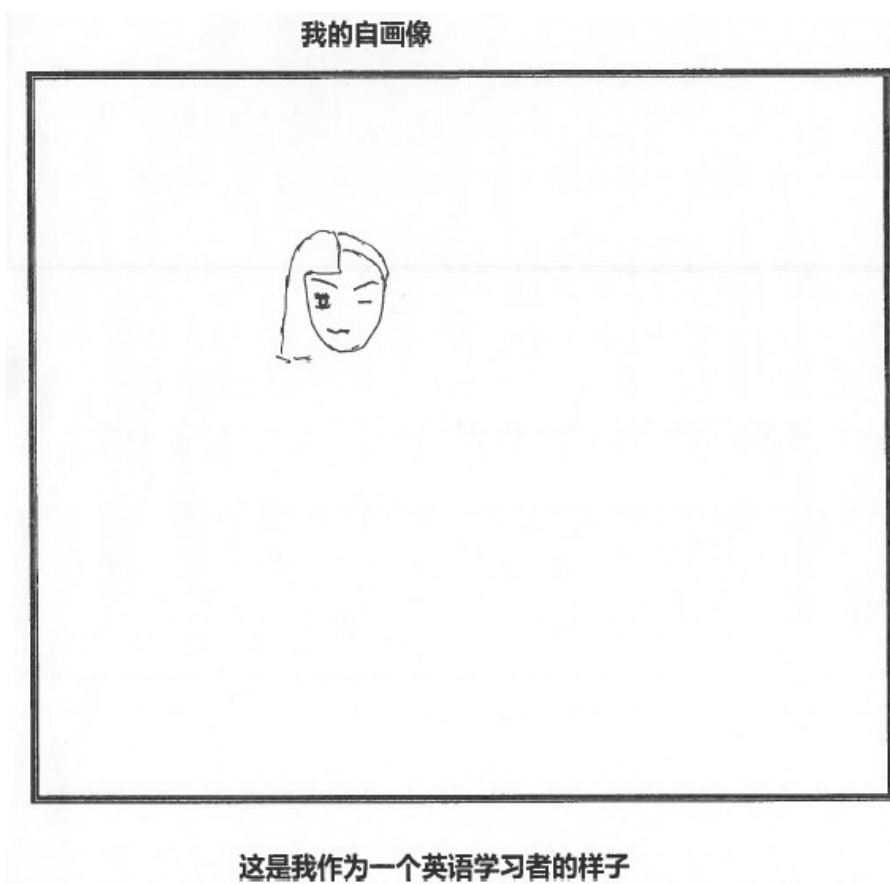
sorrow and confused). Most of them drew either a stick-person smiling or with an unhappy face in the center of sheets only, while some showed two kinds of faces both at the same time.

It implied that, along with the interpretations on reverse side of self- portrait, students' complicated emotions and paradoxical beliefs have been involved in second language study. It was indicative of perplexing relationship between emotion and beliefs: on one hand, students had been holding optimistic beliefs and delighted that learning foreign language must be a pleasant experience, but on the other hand, sorrow and confusion occupied them when the problematic nature of second language learning, especially suffering from language learning difficulties and under a great pressure of examinations.



这是我作为一个英语学习者的样子

Figure 1.3 A Second language learner with a sad face



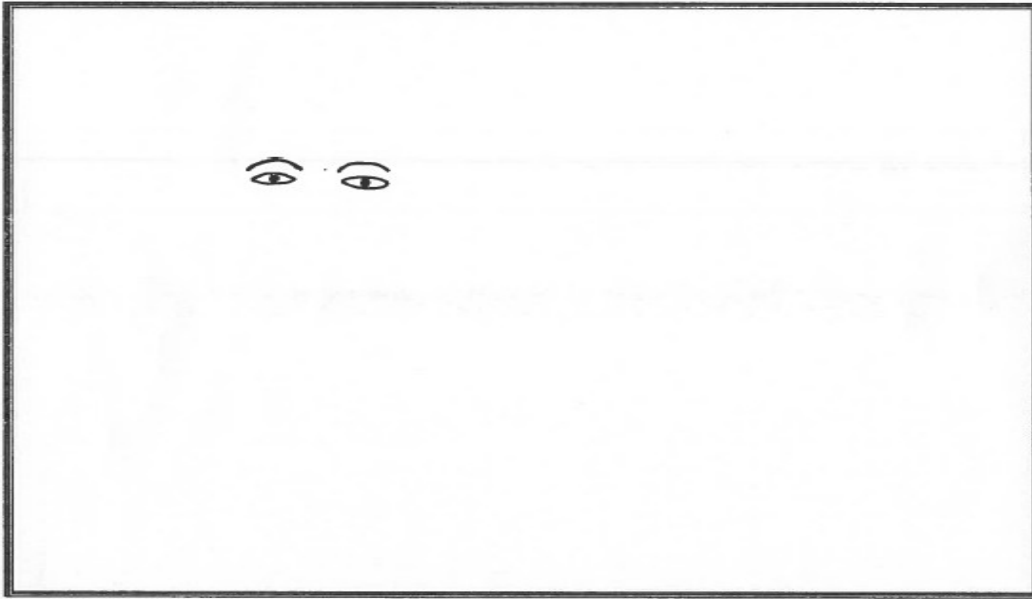
*Figure 1.4 A Second language learner with a contrasting face*

Apart from the above, a small part (16%, n=13) of the drawings was created by metaphorical method. Some of them drew a pair of eyes which represented the desire or thirst for further language study (Figure 1. 5). This contrasted with a drawing of a world map interpreted as one who wanders around the whole world, using English as a tool to communicate with people from different places (Figure 1. 6). Besides, two copies of drawings with a human figure climbing stairs implied the students holding beliefs that study never ends and requires continue efforts, which is in accordance with the dynamic feature of beliefs in socio-cultural context. There were more examples of metaphorical drawings: a portrait of sunflower with interpretation that sunflower symbolized the student with optimistic attitude and prospects while suffering from arduous learning tasks; a human figure together with stars & moons or stood in the sunshine with a tree and a fishing pool, with an explanation that



appreciating a rest and pleasant scenery in leisure time after study; a skeleton with a smiling face stepped on a rugged path with a book on top of his head which interpreting that maintaining faith even though foreign language learning has been difficult.

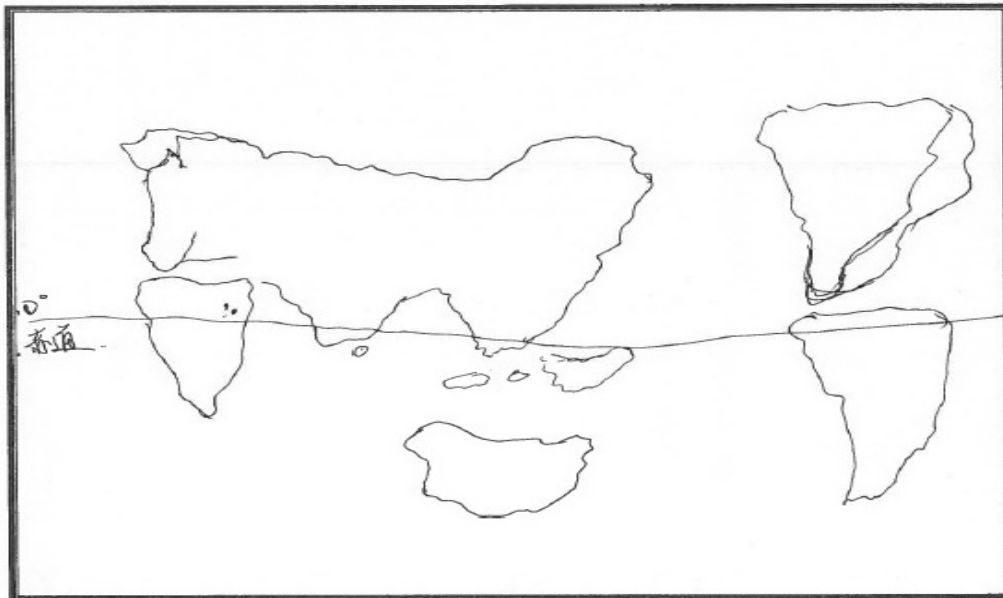
我的自画像



这是我作为一个英语学习者的样子

Figure 1.5 A pair of eyes for language learning desire

我的自画像



这是我作为一个英语学习者的样子

Figure 1.6 A world map

## 4.2 How do I view myself as an English learner: findings from interpretations

In section 2 of the research, I moved my attention from self-portraits to analyzing the interpretations of drawings on the reverse side of the task sheets (two blank copies of the data had to be ignored). More or less, the contents of verbal expressions were roughly containing the same account of information: they explained again, what had shown in the relative drawings, see table 1.2.

Table 1.2 Mediation means in the verbal interpretation on the reverse side of the self-portraits in English language learning

	With		Without		No mention	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Other people	1	1.5	78	96	2	2.5
Books	24	30	55	67.5		
Other media	12	16	67	81.5		

The explanation did not mention other mediational means such as other persons, paper materials and technological equipment employed in English language studying in self-portraits drawings identically. For example: in Figure 1.1 it described English language learning without other people, paper materials or other social media naturally, the comments on other mediational means was absent, while providing additional information by touching upon the English knowledge:

*"I am a handsome, knowledgeable and successful (English) scholar."*

Alternatively, another participant merely drew a female human figure as her self-portrait with explanation like as follow:

*"This is my appearance in study, trying to be simple by avoiding troubles, be full of motivation and energy to fulfill every study day."*

Similar to the self-portrait as Figure 1.2, neither involving other persons nor other media but with paper materials, or more specifically, with books in English language study processes, one participant drew a human-like figure sitting in front of a desk and reading books, the explanation as follow:

*"(I am) sitting in front of the desk where a cup of tea placed on it, and leisurely, enjoy the pleasure from reading books."*

However, unlike the Figure 1.1 & 1.2, some other interpretations elaborated learning English language with only social media, to be more specific, with a computer or laptop. Opposite to traditional study methods, they were more likely to seek new ways of language learning by indulging in entertainment of watching English version movies, listening to English songs and surfing English websites via the computer. Computers or laptops, as the accessible devices used for students in daily life nowadays, were non-alternative, multi-functional and beneficial tools in English language experiences. For instance, one copy of the self-portraits showed a switch on a laptop with a headphone and screened VOA web page, with the information explained as:

*"(Using) laptop for learning music, watching movies and international news, and surfing the micro blog (Chinese version of twitter) related to English study."*

Some other participants (n=7) merely concentrated on describing self-portraits without relating to English language study or other mediational means; they paid more attention to expressing whether the portraits look like themselves in reality. It seems those participants only had understood only half of the question ---- this is my self-portrait, but not another half ---- as an English

language learner; or the question offered to them has been comprehended incompletely. As some examples bellow:

*" I only draw a rough feature of myself with basic details, and it was not looking like real me very much."*

*"I draw a skeleton."*

*"I draw my own hairstyle."*

I noticed a very interesting phenomenon from the other category of the copies (n=18) ---- emotion, has been frequently mentioned in verbal expressions (see Figure 1.3). I categorized verbal interpretations involved in emotion into 3 parts: positive feeling of English language, negative feeling of English language learning and ambivalent feeling of English language learning. Variations of feelings towards English language learning conveyed subtly in sentences: 11 copies demonstrated positive feelings during English language study with smiling faces; 5 participants interpreted the negative feelings of English learning and while the other 2 surprisingly, presented ambivalent feelings in the depictions by portraying faces with either sorrow or happy expressions. Some extracts from the interpretation as bellow:

### **Positive feelings**

*"I am very happy while studying because I love English very much."*

*"I ought to persist in studying as an English learner."*

*"I love English and with my optimistic attitude."*

*"I would like to tell everyone that to smile and laugh often by drawing a cute smiling face."*

*"I draw a happy face because I think English is fantastic, yeah!"*

### **Negative feelings**

*"I feel hopeless with English, and it seems there is no method that I can find to reach my expectation."*

*"It's very boring that I have to study and read English everyday." (Figure 1.3)*

*"This is not a very happy facial expression, I only want to say that majoring in English at university is far more difficult and hard with poor English knowledge background and weak English language environment influence since childhood."*

*"Sometimes, I can not concentrate and easily be upset and irritated during English study, and also, the study time should not be too long for me."*

*"(I) Am on the way of study without stops, although sometimes pleasant surprises appeared, but I am still perplexed and hopeless and could not see end of the road."*

### Ambivalent feelings

*"The round shaped face girl always has been happy since childhood, but she is under a great of pressure and stress now because of several of examinations."*

*"Paradox." (Figure 1.4)*

Finally, a few (n=9) were further interesting to me in being metaphorical depictions of English language learners. Neither depicted their communication to other people nor a utilization of social media such as paper materials or television and computer. On the contrary, descriptions of attitude, perception towards English language study procedure frequently mentioned in the interpretations, instead of pointing out employing other persons or social media as meditational means for learning strategies, beliefs about English learning demonstrated in the sentences prominently. For examples, Figure 1.5 (see above) depicted a pair of eyes in the center of task sheet, with verbal account explaining that a pair of eyes full of desire for knowledge symbolized being eager for English study. Let's see more instances as below:

*"(I) Draw a person, some stars and a moon. The person represented myself, and stars and moon symbolized those pursuits and dreams, which are not easily being reached. Hoping that I can realize my dreams by my own efforts."*

*"I am running on the playground track."*

*"(English) Study is endless, it needs non stop hard working."*

*“Learning English language is a hard and long procedure, however, I will be like a sunflower with optimistic, hope and bright sunshine, fearless of difficulties. Smile like(s) the sunflower. ”*

*“Heavy working load on my head, and the rugged road under my feet, but (I) still need to face it with a smile.”*

*“Learning is like a sea without boundaries, and (I) am still studying hard, but the procedure is difficult.”*

### **4.3 Chinese students vs. Finnish students:**

In order to answer the second question of this study: What are differences in beliefs about SLA between Chinese and Finnish university students? I compared the findings of beliefs of SLA between Chinese and Finnish university students. Different beliefs about SLA emerged between findings from two contexts, but interestingly, some similarities can be captured regardless the different social contexts.

In the first stage, I compared the results of two groups of data in terms of utilizing meditational means in the self-portraits drawings (see Table 1.3). Only 2.4% of Chinese students drew other people in self-portraits while 31% Finnish students did. For Chinese data, 40% of the drawings showed the printed material (such as books) and 19% drawings mentioned other media in the self-portraits as English learners. However, 65% of Finnish students pictured printed material and 53% of them illustrated other media in the self-portraits. More or less, both Chinese and Finnish students attempted to achieve foreign language success through a very traditional learning method: mainly rely on internal capacities, making useful of language related handbooks or textbooks, considering other people unimportant in learning process activity (Kalaja, Alanen & Dufva, 2008).

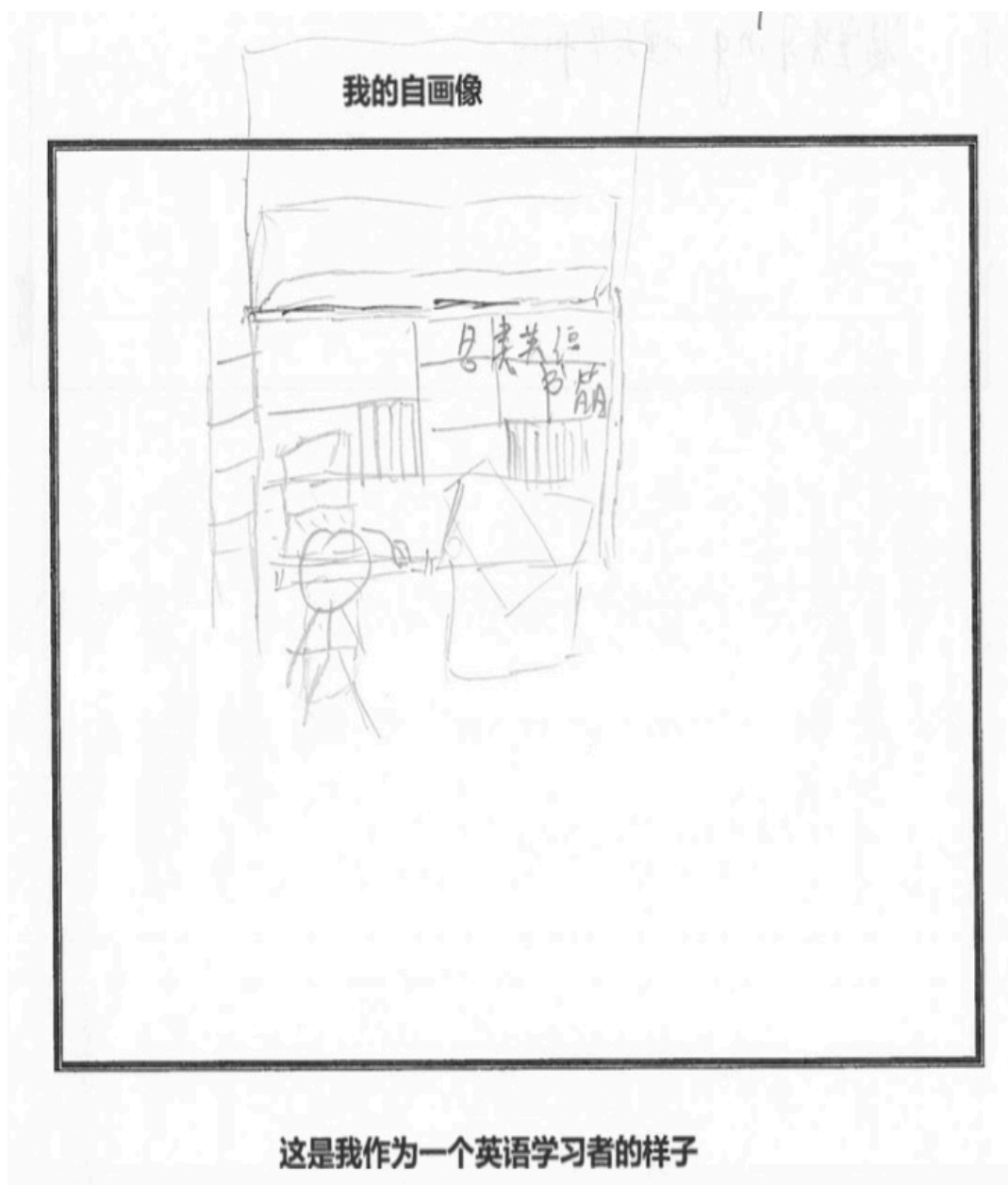
*Table 1.3 Mediation means in the self-portraits drawing between Chinese and Finnish students*

	Other people		Books		Other media	
	With	Without	With	Without	With	Without
Chinese	N=2 (2.4%)	N=79 (97.6%)	N=32 (40%)	N=49 (60%)	N=15 (19%)	N=66 (81%)
Finnish	N=34 (31%)	N=76 (69%)	N=72 (65%)	N=38 (35%)	N=58 (53%)	N=52 (47%)

However, in terms of picturing other people, books and other media as mediational means in the self-portrait drawings, the percentages of three subsections of Finnish data are clearly higher than Chinese. Self-portrait drawing, as a culturally mediated activity, some cultural conventions (Kalaja, Alanen & Dufva, 2008) strongly influence Chinese students who were more likely to follow the traditional methods of picturing self-portraits: representing one person alone in the middle of the task sheet. “Standard answer”, mostly in normal Chinese education, has gain its popularity and was the main instruction for teachers in evaluating students’ exam performance, so Chinese students inclined to offer a “standard answer” in responding the question from this research: representing a standard self-portrait of themselves as English language learners.

In the Chinese students’ self-portraits, they frequently portrayed and described themselves performing learning activities in a very specific environment ----- e.g. university dormitories (see Figure 1. 7). It is compulsory for every Chinese university student to be accommodated in a university dormitory shared by several students (usually 4 or 6 students) within the university campus, at least

for the first year of the study period. From my personal experience (I have studied at the same university as the Chinese sample in this research for 4 years), learning activities mainly took place in dormitories after the classes except for the classrooms. Apart from regular teachers' lessons, making use of time for English learning activities in dormitories was important for Chinese students. While a language learning environment was not specified in the self-portraits of Finnish students. Finnish university student are permitted to choose their living places depending on their personal wishes, since there is no accommodation stipulation at Finnish universities.





*Figure 1.7 A self-portrait of a student learning in their dormitory*

In the second stage, I investigated the similarities and differences of Chinese and Finnish university students depicting themselves as English learners in the verbal interpretation on the reverse side of the self-portraits (see table 1.4). From table 1.4, we can see more or less the same information as mentioned above in the self-portrait drawings.

*Table 1.4 Mediational means in the verbal interpretation on the reverse side of the self-portraits between Chinese and Finnish students*

	Other people		Books		Other media		No mention
	With	Without	With	Without	With	Without	
Chinese	N=1 (1.5%)	N=78 (96%)	N=24 (30%)	N=55 (67.5%)	N=12 (16%)	N=67 (81.5%)	N=2 (2.5%)
Finnish	N=31 (28%)	N=71 (65%)	N=53 (48%)	N=57 (52%)	N=50 (45%)	N=60 (55%)	N=8 (7%)

As concluded from the study of Kalaja, Alanen&Dufva (2008), Finnish students often emphasized the importance of learning by interacting in the target language environment, which was considered as the best and effective way in language learning outcomes. In contrast, Chinese students rarely mentioned the interactions between themselves and the target language environment. This may have resulted from social factors: unlike in Chinese social context, small numbers of native speakers live or work in Chinese society, while a larger amount of people such as immigrants, students or workers etc. from the target language community (English) are accessible in Finnish society.

Both Finnish and Chinese students verbalized or visualized the positive emotion or feelings involved in language learning: happy faces or smiles found in self-portraits, and expressions of positive feelings of the English learning process in the verbal interpretations. While, only Chinese students frequently mentioned the negative emotions and double feelings towards English language learning because of some factors: examination pressure, learning anxieties and intensive study time etc. Competitive academic activities, especially certification-oriented tests resulted in the negative or ambivalent feelings of Chinese students towards English learning at university.

## 5 DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Implications

This research initially aimed to explore the beliefs about second language acquisition of university students majoring in English in a specific cultural context, that is, China. Students were instructed to participate in an inquiry comprising a series of tasks - draw a self-portrait as an English language learner and interpret the self-portrait in a couple of sentences on the reverse side; complete six open-ended questions by retrospection of English language learning experience from elementary to tertiary education phase either in classroom or outside classroom. The analysis of this part was excluded from the study mainly because of the constraints of thesis length and time limitation. After I analyzed the findings from the pool of data, several findings have been revealed and explored deeply.

Overall, a large majority of participants merely drew themselves in the center of the task sheets, while tiny percentage of them presented other human like figures (friends or peers) along with them in the self-portraits. Language teachers, involved in the teaching and learning process inevitably, were 100% absent from students' drawings. These self-portraits of English language learning have taught us some lessons. Firstly, in the Chinese context, foreign language learning turned out to be a lonely business, in other words, young language learners tried to depend on their own efforts in pursuing study goals without help from other persons near them, including peers and teachers etc. Learners viewed themselves as an individual who managed to rely on self-study skills without communication or interaction with others, which is in

accordance with traditional Chinese understanding of learning. The high percentage of absence of other people implies its weak influence on students' language learning strategies.

Although students appeared to have failed to seek help from activities or interactions with other people, I have noted the depiction of plenty of mediational means appearing in the drawings. Students were motivated in receiving knowledge by other means of learning (text books, dictionaries or literature), engaged in applying social media mostly computers to read English websites, to listen English music and to watch English movies etc. However, comparing the percentage of books and social media as mediational artifacts, the percentage of utilization of books was twice that of social media. Paper materials, to be more specific, textbooks were the main mediating artifacts that students employed in order to gain new language knowledge. The traditional learning method-digesting knowledge from printed material continues to be dominant among students. Except for utilization of textbooks, taking advantage of social media (computers and MP3s) frequently to receive outside knowledge source was another learning strategy in helping to reach study goals for students. Language learners also can be understood as "*recipients*" (Kalaja, Menezes & Barcelos, 2008, p.197) receiving external information and transferring into their own mind after mental digestion.

Emotions highly interacted with students' beliefs towards second language acquisition either from the self-portraits or from verbal interpretations. As Aragão (2011) pointed out in the research that in foreign language learning there is a close relationship between emotions and beliefs; in other words, this interplay between the two is crucial in understanding students' actions in the learning process. Students depicted their feelings of English learning experience both from the students' drawings and interpretations on the reverse side. Positive, negative or ambivalent feelings towards foreign language learning were indicative of intricate and dynamic features of beliefs from students. In

brief, positive feelings of students depend on the intrinsic motives and high level of personal capacities in English knowledge. Pressure and stress from English study and academic examinations were the main factor of resulting in the negative emotions during the learning process, thus, examination-centered language teaching method played an important role in Chinese education in schools. In order to survive in the competitive educational context (Gao, 2010), the action of consuming large portion of time in preparation of exams was highly preferred. Finally, new language learning methods seem not always to be attractive, appealing or interesting because it requires long-term patience and efforts on literal study (new vocabulary, grammatical rules etc.). Students have ambivalent emotions -satisfied or dissatisfied was indicative of the two features of foreign language learning in learning experiences perplexedly.

Verbal accounts, in comparison with self-portraits, were more flexible in expressing the ideas that were difficult or abstract to visualize during the drawing process in avoiding ambiguity. With the constraints of drawing skills, the holistic information in self-portraits were at risk of missing without the help of interpretations, for example, one student complained her poor skills of drawing verbally in supplementary explanation of the precise content of her self-portrait.

Besides, English language was not only related to target language community (America or Great Britain), but also regarded as a communicative tool connecting English language learners with target communities with concerns (Yashima, 2009). However, merely inputting language knowledge from a target language community, while interacting with the people who speak the target community language, was hardly observed from Chinese students account. This phenomenon may result from some factors related to societal and cultural context ---- the opportunities of interactions between target language community speakers were far beyond students' reach in Chinese mainland, especially in southern inland cities. The involvement of a small number of

overseas students or professors in universities in helping language learners was considered weak, so that it was almost ignored in the language learner's learning experience.

Educational culture effectively impacted on students' learning beliefs in either shaping or constructing language-learning strategy. Past experience, of either general education or language particular, determines learners' beliefs about language learning (Ellis, 1994). It was concluded from a survey of foreign language students at Trinity College, Dublin, conducted by Little and Singleton in 1990. This conclusion may be taken as being applicable to Chinese university English language major students: students' schema from previous study experience at regular education such as schooling constructed language-learning habits (reciting texts and new vocabulary in morning classes; studying in front a desk and reading books under a tree in the morning, etc.) was reflected in their drawings and interpretations, and they continued to carry it into further study. In addition, application of previous learning strategies echoes the thoughts that beliefs are relatively stable and socio-culturally constructed (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003).

A brief comparison between the results of Finnish and Chinese university students' beliefs about second language acquisition revealed the similar and different learning beliefs in two social cultural contexts. Learning in general or language learning in particular as study activities that were socio-culturally mediated, so different social cultural contexts lead to learners' different belief towards language learning. Both Finnish and Chinese students believed that foreign language learning is a personal activity, which requires utilizing internal intelligence, depending on literacy-based way in learning and viewing other people as unimportant, while the interaction between people from target language community was regarded as the best way of foreign language learning for Finnish students. The role of mediational tools in language learning for Finnish students was dramatically more important than for Chinese

students. In addition, constrained by the rules of art (painting skills), a percentage of both Finnish or Chinese students' pictures show a very traditional self-portraits with human figures facing viewers. However, the beliefs about foreign language learning acquisition from Chinese and Finnish university students vary in many ways: for example, positive feelings were held by both Chinese and Finnish students, while Chinese students were inclined to suffer from both negative and ambivalent feelings in the English learning process, possible resulting from a competitive academic activities, examination pressure etc. Past learning experience plays a very important role for both Finnish and Chinese students, which leads Chinese students to believe that the language learning activity usually take place in dormitory, with no specified learning environment from Finnish students. Besides, social cultural contexts resulted in learners' learning strategies, comparing with Chinese students; Finnish students succeeded in seeking and enjoying interaction between native speakers for language evaluation.

## **5.2 Limitations**

This study, conducted in a qualitative method as a case study, had its limitations in terms of generalizability since the samples were gathered from one of the universities in the center part of China. In terms of research design, self-portrait drawing activity not only constrained the expressions of participants as it is more "static," but also has conventions in self-portrait painting in art. In addition, as the conductor of this research my absence from the data collection and time for the tasks completion might be inappropriate.

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## APPENDIX:

英文名：

年龄：

我的自画像



这是我作为一个英语学习者的样子

Name:

**MY SELF-PORTRAIT**

A large, empty rectangular box with a double-line black border, intended for a student to draw a self-portrait.

This is what I look like a **learner** of English

问题 1. 请用自己的话回答以下三个问题:

- 1) 在校学习英语期间,你认为你学到了什么?(小学,初中和高中)
  
- 2) 在校学习英语期间,你认为哪些方面你没有学到?(小学,初中和高中)
  
- 3) 在课外或者空闲时间里,你学到了哪些有关英语方面的知识?(你还在学校学习的阶段)

问题 2. 请用自己的话回答以下三个问题:

- 1) 你认为在校学习期间,最适合你的英语学习方法是什么?(小学,初中和高中)
  
- 2) 有哪些英语学习方法对你又不适用呢?
  
- 3) 在课外或者空闲时间里,你是通过哪些方法学习英语的?

TASK 1. Please tell us in your own words:

- a. What do you think you learned about the English language at school? (elementary school, lower secondary school and upper secondary school)
  
- b. What do you think you did NOT learn about the English language at school? (elementary school, lower secondary school and upper secondary school)
  
- c. What do you think you learn about the English language outside school, in your free time? (when you were still going to school?)

TASK 2. Please tell us in your own words:

- a. What do you think were the best ways for you to learn English at school? (elementary school, lower secondary school and upper secondary school)
  
- b. Which ways did not work as well for you?
  
- c. In which way do you think you learned English outside school, in your free time?