A STUDY OF CHINESE STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF AMERICAN CULTURE
AND THEIR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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A STUDY OF CHINESE STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF AMERICAN CULTURE
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Thesis

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Language and Culture

Language and culture are inextricably linked. Learning a language is also learning a culture; teaching a language is a way to introduce a culture. People use language for the exchange of information. Language can be used in different types and the most common way we see is verbal language. There are also nonverbal languages used in communication. People use body language to help explain their ideas. Sign language is most commonly used by deaf people. Kuo and Lai (2006) define language as a system of symbols and rules that is used for meaningful communication. Most students’ language acquisition focuses on the four aspects of the language: speaking, reading, writing, and listening. While each language consists of four different areas: phonology, semantics, grammar and pragmatics, some languages are very different from each other.

English and Chinese have many significant differences. English and German both belong to the Indo-European language family and these two languages have a lot of similarities in their structure. Both languages’ alphabetic systems are based on the Latin language and there are a lot of English words borrowed from German. But Chinese language belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family and it is very different from English language structures. As a result, students from Chinese speaking cultures would feel English is more difficult to learn than the
students coming from German speaking cultures. Though it is difficult, it does not mean the language cannot be learned well; it is a case of the time students have to spend in learning. Students from German-speaking cultures may find themselves easily acquiring the rules of English language structure while Chinese speaking students may take a longer period for acquiring English language structure rule.

According to Kluckhohn (1959), “Culture is a way of thinking, feeling, believing. It is the group’s knowledge stored up (in memory of men; in books and objects) for future use….A culture constitutes a storehouse of the pooled learning of the group” (pp. 24-25). Condon (1973) also defined culture as a way of life. People’s behaviors and beliefs are usually reflections on their own cultures, no matter where they come from. Culture includes but is not limited to: dress, ideas, customs, food, beliefs, religions, uses of time and space, etc. Culture is learned (Damen, 1987) and it can also be taught. Culture is dynamic and it changes along with the society as it develops. Culture is a reflection of human life. Damen (1987) also stated that culture and language are closely related and interactive. It not only affects how people talk, but also helps people to understand other languages. In sum, culture is the foundation of communication (Kuo & Lai, 2006).

There has been reciprocal interaction between cultures and language. When students learn a language, they also learn the cultural meaning of the language. For example, Chinese students would wonder what the word “hamburger” means since they do not have this kind of food in their culture. When they find out the cultural facts about this food, they understand the word. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (2015) points out that students cannot use a new language proficiently until they master the culture of target language. It also calls
attention on the importance of culture-based language learning: “The United States must educate students who are linguistically and culturally equipped to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad. This imperative envisions a future in which ALL students will develop and maintain proficiency in English and at least one other language, modern or classical” (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2015). It points out the role of culture in acquiring another language. Language learning is considered hard and boring by some students (Gardner, 2011). If culture learning was put into the classroom, students’ interests in learning a second language could be stimulated. When they learn a new culture, it also helps them to handle the new language well.

Chinese Students in the US

Given the nature of its people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the US is a multicultural society and it is therefore called a “melting pot” (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2010). Immigrants from all over the world gathered together and formed a country with diverse cultures, and a lot of students speak English as their second language at school. The population of Chinese-speaking people residing in the United States was about 3.7 million in the year of 2013, and Chinese language has been the third most popular language after English and Spanish (United States Bureau of Census, 2013). Among the English language learners, students who speak Chinese as their first language are the second largest group and have been the fastest growing group in recent years (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2015).

In addition to English learners in PreK-12 schools, many international students in higher educational institutions are also English language learners. China
was, by far, the leading source of international students in the US followed by India and Saudi Arabia (Institute of International Education, 2015). In 2014, there were 886,052 international students enrolled at US colleges and universities. Chinese students comprises 31% (274,000) of the total population (see figure 1.1), and the Chinese student population keeps increasing (Institute of International Education, 2015).

![Figure 1.1 Places of origins of international students in 2013-2014 academic year.](http://www.iie.org/)


Social English is very different from academic English, and the international students usually find they are lost when they first arrive in the US (Li, Fox & Almarza, 2007). While social English is the language of everyday communication in oral and written forms, academic English is more demanding and complex than social English. Though social English and academic English are not two separate languages, students who are proficient in social English may not necessarily have the academic English proficiency. Chinese students spend years learning English as a foreign language before they come to the US, and most of them still have difficulties in classrooms.
Not only because they lack fluency in English, more importantly, cultural difference is a huge challenge for them. For instance, most Chinese are accustomed to expressing their idea indirectly while most American people like to go straight to the point and talk frankly (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2010).

Characteristics of Chinese Students

Confucianism plays a vital role in shaping student’s development in China, and most students are influenced by it during their school years. Education is considered a tool to achieve personal perfection under Confucianism, and the society views education as a path to a person’s success and an honor to the family. As a result, a lot of pressures are poured upon the student’s shoulders. The education system in China is pretty much examination-oriented, and the typical example for that is the National College Entrance Examination (Gao kao in Chinese). The exam is held once a year, and it is the only chance for high school students to pursue their dreams in higher education. As a result, students’ achieving high performance on this exam has been an ultimate goal for both teachers and students.

Teachers are always considered as the authority, and they are rarely challenged or questioned by the students. Students in China are often descried as “rote-learners,” and they are usually viewed as “passive,” “quiet,” “unquestioning,” “disciplined,” (Biggs, 1999). In most Chinese classrooms, teachers are responsible for lecturing, while students are responsible for listening and taking notes. Since Chinese is the dominant language in the society, the English learning and teaching in China mainly takes place in the classroom. For most students, it is the only place for learning English. Students spend most of their time on learning English grammar
and reading comprehension while spending very little time on speaking and listening. As a result, a lot of students graduate with limited proficiency in English.

According to Akande (2009), there are some different features between Chinese and American students (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Salient features of individualism and collectivism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individualism (Representative of US culture)</th>
<th>Collectivism (Representative of non-Western cultures e.g. China)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Fostering independence and individual achievement</td>
<td>1. Fostering interdependence and group success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Promoting self-expression, individual thinking, and personal choice</td>
<td>2. Promoting adherence to norms, respect for authority/elders, group consensus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Associated with egalitarian relationships and flexibility in roles (e.g., upward mobility)</td>
<td>3. Associated with stable, hierarchical roles (dependent on gender, family background, age)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Understanding the physical world as knowable apart from its meaning for human life</td>
<td>4. Understanding the physical world in the context if its meaning for human life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Associated with private property, individual ownership</td>
<td>5. Associated with shared property, group ownership</td>
</tr>
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To a large extent, Akabnde appears to over-generalize Chinese and American students. Because the Chinese government implemented one-child-only policy from 1982 to 2015, most Chinese students are “the only one child” in their families. As a result, they are more independent and individualistic than their older generations. Based on my personal experience, however, I agree with Akabnde that Chinese
students are respectful of authorities and elders. There is no significant difference between the young generation and the older generations.

**Chinese Students’ Perception of American Culture**

Many Chinese students experience culture shock when they begin to attend classes in the US. These include but are not limited to the differences of food and holidays that people celebrate. To many Chinese students, there are significant differences between Chinese classroom culture and American classroom culture. In the US, the relationship between students and teachers is equal. Some instructors may prefer to be called by their first names in the US, but this is never allowed in the Chinese classroom. In the US, teachers are more like facilitators of learning rather than authorities of knowledge. Students are usually involved in discussions and they can pose questions anytime during the class. Teachers often praise students’ critical thinking and creative ideas (Upton, 1988). I have studied in the University of Akron for two years, and I found most professors expect students to be the main focus in the classroom and they usually ask students to work together in groups to offer their thoughts and questions.

Students can ask questions any time in the class, and they can disagree with the teachers and challenge their arguments. Personally, I found that informality is the norm in the classrooms in the US. Students may dress casually, and they can eat or drink when the teacher gives permission.

**Statement of the Problem**

Many Chinese students who learned English in China found they had a hard time communicating with native English speakers in English after they spent years of
learning the language. They spent most of their time analyzing the grammar and memorizing the vocabulary (Tsai, 2012), and there is not enough attention paid to understanding the cultural meaning behind the language. So when they communicate with native English speakers, they have difficulties understanding the meaning of the conversation, especially when slang terms are being used. Many American professors have a hard time understanding the Chinese students. They do not know why the Chinese students are so quiet in the class and they rarely ask questions. They also could not understand why the Chinese students do not favor seminar style classes. (Li, Fox, & Almarza, 2007).

In recent years, more and more Chinese students are going to the US to pursue their education and acquire English as their second language. Many Chinese students have a hard time adjusting themselves to the American culture. In the meantime, many professors in the US lacking knowledge of Chinese culture easily misunderstood Chinese students’ classroom behaviors because of their limited knowledge of Chinese culture. As a result, many Chinese students return to China with limited proficiency in English. Schools are competing to attract Chinese international students to increase their enrollment population. When these students arrive in the US, they find it is hard to fit into the American classroom culture due to the lack of cultural responsive programs to help their adjustment. This study examines the Chinese students’ expectation about the school’s support, and recommendations are given to the university administrations on how to support Chinese international students.

Bloomfield (1983), Brown (2007), Pathirage, Morrow, Walpitage & Skolits (2014) look at the role of culture in English language acquisition. They found
students engaged in cultural learning help improve their second language acquisition. The more cultural knowledge was introduced to the students, the higher level language acquisition could be achieved by the students. However, they did not give attention to how cultural differences between China and the US affect Chinese students’ English language acquisition in American universities. In spite of the large population of Chinese students in the US, educational researchers have not inquired about how Chinese students’ perceive and adjust to American culture in order to improve their English language skills. This study looks at the Chinese students’ perceptions of cultural difference between US and China, and their adjustments to learn the English language.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to examine the relationship between Chinese students’ perceptions of American culture and their English language learning. Specifically, this study focuses on the following three research questions:

1. What are Chinese students’ perceptions of culture in the US?
2. How do Chinese students make adjustments to facilitate their English language acquisition?
3. What are Chinese students’ interpretations of the relationship between their cultural adjustments and their English language acquisition?

The research questions focus on the students’ perceptions of American culture and how they adjust their English learning strategies accordingly. The study uses a qualitative study and interviews four Chinese students. Their responses are analyzed by three theoretical frameworks.
Findings

The study gave me a chance to look at how the other Chinese students perceive the American culture, and how their perceptions of American culture shape their English language leaning. I found the participants perceived several differences between American and Chinese culture. These differences include but are not limited to life styles, foods and classroom culture. I also found that the participants undergo several cultural adjustments to help their English language learning. They adjusted themselves through attending social activities, changing learning strategies and changing attitudes toward the host culture. Their improvements of English language proficiency appeared to be correlated with their degree of acculturation to the American culture. The deeper they adapted to the American culture, a higher level of English language proficiency they could achieve. In the process of English language learning, their attitudes have changed. Some participants expressed that they could look at issues from different perspectives.

Significance of the Study

Chinese students have been the largest international student group in the US. While they are bringing in a lot of economic benefits to the US, they also bring challenges to US educators. How to provide culturally responsive teaching to them has been an issue for many educational institutions. A lot of schools are trying to update their school facilities such as dorms and dining services to help the Chinese students get used to the American life, but not enough attention is given to accommodate them from a cultural perspective. The findings of this study can provide recommendations to administrators and faculty to prepare them on how to welcome these students in a culturally responsive way. These recommendations are
generated from the participants’ responses to the interview questions. For example, universities could create programs to connect the Chinese students with the community to encourage their interactions.

**Limitations of the Study**

In qualitative researches, it is hard to maintain objectivity at a near zero level (Drapeau, 2002). Though some researchers argue that using subjectivity and combining one’s own experience could help better understand the subject of a study (Schneider, 1999), these attempts in research present certain risks. For example, the researcher’s own blind spots could impact the result of the study as well as projections on behalf of the participants (Kahn, 1996). In this qualitative study, the investigator and the participants have similar experiences in the process of learning the English language. More specifically, both the investigator and participants come from the same culture and attend the same university. Because of their personal relationship with the investigator, the participants might have answered some questions catering to the investigator’s expectation. However, the common cultural background might have helped the investigator develop a more in-depth understanding of the participants’ responses.

There are many factors that affect the Chinese students’ English learning, and the culture value is just one of them. For example, age and gender differences also play roles in English language learning. This study does not include those factors but focuses the English language learning from the cultural perspective. The result may be different if those factors are considered for future researches.

The institution that the participants and investigator attend, the University of Akron, located in Akron, Ohio. This is a small city compared with Cleveland or
Miami, and even smaller when mentioned with New York or Los Angeles. The culture in this small town does not necessarily represent the whole American culture because people in big cities have more chances to take part in social activities than the participants can do here. Thus, the result could be applied to the Chinese students who have similar geographical and cultural backgrounds, but may not apply to Chinese students in metropolitan areas.

This study only focused on the experiences of four Chinese graduate students who majored in English in China. A larger population for sampling may present better results. Students from non-English majors in China may have different perceptions than the participants do.

Limitations of this study include small number of samplings, students’ geographic locations, and researcher and participants’ relations. Future studies could avoid these limitations and give more representative research results.

Personal Experience

As a Chinese student who came to the United States to pursue a master degree, I have a lot of similarities with the other Chinese students in the process of learning the English language. In China, English is a required subject for all students Grades 6-9. English education in China focuses on memorizing the vocabularies and practicing the grammar skills. There is hardly any chance to use extra sources like English movies or newspapers to practice the English language. After studying English language for six years, I started my college life with a major in English language. To be admitted to universities, students have to take the College Entrance Exam, and English is a required subject. My university is a joint venture founded by a Chinese and an American university. Thus, I had a lot of opportunities of talking
with my American professors and friends in English. These opportunities enabled me to know more about the American culture, and my English skills improved a lot from communications with Americans and using of resources like English movies and newspapers compared those who rarely did these practices.

I came to the University of Akron at Akron, Ohio, in America to pursue my master degree in Education. I believe this is a chance for me to know the country from my own experience, and I want to use my learning to reach my career goal. My college life equipped me with some general knowledge of American culture and I did not experience much culture shock. This soft landing gave me confidence to get used to the American life quickly, and I started actively communicating with my American classmates and professors. I think this experience helped me a lot to keep improving my English language skills. However, at the same time I saw some Chinese friends have a hard time in making cultural adjustments and improving their English skills. They did not positively to learn the culture, and still put themselves in the Chinese friends circle. As a result, their English stayed the same level as if they just arrived in the US. From my own experience, I saw how cultural learning helped my English language acquisition. I think my experience can be applied to the other English learners.

Chapter Plan

In Chapter I, I provided the background information for the study and also stated the problems, purpose, and questions for the research. Chapter II will review the relevant research literature regarding the cultural context of English language acquisition. In Chapter III, I will explain the theoretical framework and methods that are used in this research. Chapter IV will present the findings of this research.
Finally, Chapter V will examine the implications of the study. Drawing from the findings of the study, I will make recommendations regarding improving international education.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review consists of five parts.  First, I examine research literature regarding languages acquisition theories. Second, I review research literature concerning second language learning. Third, I examine research literature that focuses on the role of culture in second language acquisition. Specifically, I focus on Schumann’s Acculturation Model and Gardner’s Socio-educational Model. Fourth, I review and introduce research literature concerning Chinese students’ English language acquisition. Finally, I examine James Banks’s theory of multicultural education in relation to the meanings of learning English language for Chinese students.

Theories in Language Acquisition

Language acquisition is one of the most impressive and amazing aspects of human development. Modern research on analyzing human language acquisition systematically did not start until the second half of the twentieth century (Brown, 2007). Theories of language acquisition have been developed by different schools of scholars. Brown (2007) categorized the research of these scholars into three approaches: behavioral, nativist, and functional.

Behaviorism was influential in the 1940s and 1950s, and the behavioral approach focused on the immediately perceivable sides of linguistic behavior and the
relationships between publicly observable responses and events in the surroundings (Brown 2007; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). A traditional behaviorist might argue that a child imitates the language produced by the surroundings, and he or she learns the language when he or she receives positive reinforcement. One of the most well-known behaviorists is B.F Skinner. From the standpoint of behaviorism, language learning is seen as the formation of habits (Bloomfield, 1983; Mitchell, Myles & Marsden, 2013; Skinner 1985).

The behavioral approach was soon challenged by a number of nativist scholars who believed that language acquisition is innately determined (Brown, 2007). Among the nativist scholars, Noam Chomsky was one of the most influential figures in linguistics. In his 1959 review of B.F. Skinner’s book, Chomsky challenged behaviorism and argued that children are born with a genetic capacity that enables them to learn the language naturally. Chomsky (1965) described the innate knowledge, which is embodied in the brain, as a Language Acquisition Device (LAD). His theory of language acquisition has come to be known as Universal Grammar (Cook, 2013; Mitchell, Myles & Marsden, 2013; White, 2003). Chomsky’s Universal Grammar is widely adopted in the early studies of first and second language acquisition and it still plays a significant role in today’s research in human language acquisition.

One of the earliest proponents of functional approaches was the Swiss psychologist/epistemologist Jean Piaget (Mitchell, Myles & Marsden, 2013). According to Piaget, children’s language is built on their cognitive development (Lefmann & Combs-Orme, 2013; Wadsworth, 2004). Children developed their
language by interacting with their environment. In Piaget’s view, the language children learn is determined by what they already knew about the world.

Another influential researcher on humans’ language acquisition was Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (Brown, 2007). He studied the interactions among children, and also their interactions with adults. According to Vygotsky (1978), Lantoif (2008), Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden (2013), Nassaji & Cumming (2000), a person’s language develops primarily from social interactions. Vygotsky (1978) named a metaphorical place where language learners could do more when communicating with others than they would achieve independently as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In his argument, Vygotsky believed that a language learner can go from an actual developmental level to a higher level of potential development if he or she is provided additional help from others.

The three approaches explain how students develop their language skills. In this study, I applied the functional approach into the investigation. By applying Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development theory, I think Chinese international students could increase their interactions with native English speakers or acquire more American culture to help improve their English language proficiency.

Overview of Second Language Acquisition

In this section I examine the development of second language studies and some major influential theories in second language acquisition.

Early Studies in Second Language Acquisition

Compared with the language acquisition studies, the second language acquisition is a relatively new field of human language acquisition studies. Though
some researchers studied second language learning before late 1960s, most of them are small parts of first language acquisition theories (Myles, 2010). For instance, in Chomsky’s critique of Skinner (1957), he argues that the innate faculty, known as Universal Grammar in children’s bodies would guild them to acquire the language (Chomsky, 1959). Though the Universal Grammar did not talk about second language acquisition, his ideas were widely used in early studies of second language acquisitions.

There are some similarities between first and second language acquisitions. For example, in Chomsky’s Universal Grammar theory, children are equipped with an innate faculty that helps them to learn the language. Lenneberg (1967) suggests that this theory can also apply to second language learners and they can learn a second language without the need for any intervention or teaching. Behaviorists also develop pedagogies based on their arguments. Because children learn their first language by stimulus-response-reinforcement at the beginning stage, behaviorists also applied the same approach to teach the second language learners (Lado, 1957; Skinner, 1957). Newmark (1966) extended Skinner and Lado’s theory to the classroom where he addressed that teachers should let the learning process take its course. Students could learn the second language through modeling and interactions with the teachers.

While in early studies researchers try to apply some first language learning theories to second language learning, they found second language learning has its own characteristics. In his early study on second language acquisition, Corder (1967) found students usually have errors, and most of these errors originated from their first language. For example, Chinese students applied Chinese grammar to their English language learning which resulted in grammatical mistakes. Richards (1974)
addressed that learners’ errors are common in early stages of second language learning, and teachers need to pay attention and correct the errors in the classroom.

Age Differences and the Critical Period Hypothesis

Second language learners are different from first language learners based on the age differences. The Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (Bley-Vroman, 1980; Schachter, 1990) points out that what happens in child language acquisition is not necessarily the same as in adult second language acquisition. This theory argues that children and adults have many different ways of learning language in second language learning (Gass, Behney & Plonsky, 2013). For example, in normal situations, children already acquired the knowledge of the native language before they went to school. But in second language acquisitions, most learners do not have knowledge for the target language.

Another difference is that children and adults have different natural understandings before they learn a second language (Long, 2007). Psychologists and cognitive scientists believed that human minds consist of an array of specialized tools that can be harnessed for various tasks. The ability of using these tools to process information is considered as natural understanding. Most second language learners already have acquired the linguistics systems in their native language, and what they need to learn is the formatives of the second language. For example, adult learners need to learn the language forms to be used in different social environments. However, children have less social understandings than adults. These social understandings could be the main culture in the second language group, people’s values in relationships among friends and families. They have to begin with the
learning of second language forms as well as different forms to be used in different social settings.

Research on age-related effects in the second language development often directs to the Critical Period Hypothesis. The notion of critical period can be characterized as “being of limited duration within well-defined and predictable termini and as being related to very specific capacities or behaviors” (Singleton, 2005, p. 270). This hypothesis is most prominently advanced by Lenneberg (1967), and in this research he argues that the human brain becomes progressively stiff and rigid after the age of nine for the purposes of learning languages naturally.

The Critical Period Hypothesis is widely used in recent research in second language learning. In a research conducted by Johnson and Newport (1989), a number of English learners are put in different groups based on the time of their arrival to the United States to compare the second language ultimate attainments. For instance, those who arrived less than a year were put in one group, and those who had been in the US for two to three years were put in another group, and so on. They found the earlier arrivals had more time and opportunities to reach the American culture and they practiced their English skills longer than the late arrivals. The researchers conclude that there is a clear and strong advantage for the earlier arrivals over the late arrivals.

Monitor Model in Second Language Learning

Apart from the Critical Period Hypothesis, Krashen (1988, 1989) proposed the Monitor Model for second language learning, and this model is still one of the most influential and popular hypotheses in recent research (Lantoif, 2008; Lightbrown & Spada, 2013; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Loschky, 1994;
In the Monitor Model, Krashen addressed five hypotheses: Acquisition-learning Hypothesis, Monitor Hypothesis, Natural Order Hypothesis, Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis.

The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis states that acquisition and learning are two independent systems in second language performance. The acquisition system requires meaningful interaction with the target language group’s natural communication setting, and the learning system requires formal process to obtain the language or to learn the grammar. Monitor Hypothesis explains the relationship between acquisition and learning. It reveals that what is learned is available only as to edit or make changes in what has already been produced. The Natural Order Hypothesis states that rules of language are acquired in a predictable order. Krashen explained how learners learn a second language and how the language acquisition takes place. He used the formula “i+1” to express the hypothesis. In this formula, i stands for the learner’s current language level and acquisition takes place when the learner is exposed to the comprehensible input that belongs to the i+1. The Affective Filter Hypothesis states that there are some variables that affect the second language learning. Such variables are like feelings, motives, needs and emotional states. Second language learners can achieve high learning results when these variables are at highest positive value.

Individual Differences in Second Language Learning

In theory, students are supposed to achieve similar successes in second language acquisitions if they follow the standard hypothesis. But in reality, this is not the case. Why do students have different levels of achievement, and why are some learners more successful? Researchers focus on the four main areas of
differences: language aptitude, learning style, motivation, and learning strategies (Carroll, 1988; Gardner, 1993; Roberts & Meyer, 2012; Robison, 2001; Skehan, 1989). They found that students achieved different language acquisition result based on their different learning strategies, motivations, learning styles, and their language aptitude.

In early studies of individual differences, Naiman, Flohlich, Stern and Todesco (1978) found that language learners with high performance usually share some similar characteristics. These common characteristics were identified as learning strategies, motivations and personalities. Students who had integrative motivations usually used efficient learning strategy, and they usually could achieve high performance. Carroll and Sapon (1959) developed the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) to predict the success of foreign language learning. Though this method is now rarely used, new foreign language tests like TOEFL, IELTS have been used to test the aptitude of a second language learner of English.

Researchers believe that language aptitude alone cannot determine the second language learning. Stories about some talented students’ not studying hard and achieving lower performance than their less talented peers are very common. Personalities such as adventuresome (Alastair, 2009; Grace, 1981; Griffiths, 1991), self-confidence (Gabriel & Katchan, 1994; Hodge, 1978; Robison,); and learning styles like field-dependent/independent (Hatami, 2013;) are all considered to be one of second language learners’ differences.

attitudes can be grouped by two dichotomies: integrated and instrumental (Garner, 1985) and intrinsic and extrinsic (Noels et al., 2000). Integrated motivation learners usually have personal affinity for the people who speak a target language while learners holding instrumental motivations usually want to learn the language for practical reasons such as getting high salary or going to college.

Language learners usually have their own behaviors and techniques to learn a language, and this learning strategy can usually enhance their learning (Hsiao & Oxford, 2002). Learning strategy is strongly influenced by the nature of motivation, personality and cognitive styles (Brown, 2000). Researches showed that successful second language learners are usually those who know how to manipulate style and strategy levels in their daily encounters with the language (Cohen, 1998; Nunan, 1997; Oxford, 1996; Reid, 1995). Second language learners with high language performance are aware of general personality and cognitive characteristics or tendencies that usually lead to successful acquisition, and strive to develop those characteristics (Ehrman, 1996, Oxford, 2001).

Through my experience of learning English as a second language, I noticed Chinese students hold different goals when learning the English language. Some want to have a good career while some want to know a new culture. The different attitudes toward learning the English language make students take different approaches to learn the language. The individual differences generate different levels of English language proficiency among these students. Some students know how to use shortcuts, like adjusting themselves to the host culture, to improve their English language skills. Some students who are reluctant to accept the new culture find obstacles to improve their English skills.
In order to gain a better understanding of relationship between acculturation and second language acquisition, I adopted Acculturation Model and Socio-educational Model as the theoretical framework of my study.

Schumann’s Acculturation Model

The Acculturation Model is a theory proposed by Schumann (1978) to describe the acquisition process of a second language (Ellis, 1994). Perhaps it is the earliest model that connects the role of culture and second language acquisition (Gass & Plonsky, 2013). In his study of English learning for non-native speakers, John Schumann found participants’ failure to acquire the target language due to the limited contacts with native English speakers. According to Schumann (1986), acculturation means the social and psychological integration of the learner with the target language group. The Acculturation Model predicts that learners will acquire the target language to the degree they acculturate to the target language group (Schuman, 1978, 1986). It suggests that the acquisition of a second language is directly linked to the acculturation (Barjesteh, 2013; Pierce, 1995).

Schumann (1986) argued two groups of variables that affect the quality of contact that second language learners have with the target language group, and eventually affect the second language acquisition: social variables and affective variables. The social variables include seven aspects and are as follows:

*Social dominance:* If the second language learners’ group is superior to the target language group in terms of political, technical and economic status, then it will tend not to learn the target language. If learners’ group is inferior then it is likely to
resist to the target language. If these two groups are roughly equal, then two groups will tend to contact more and the second language acquisition will be enhanced.

*Assimilation, preservation and adaption:* These three integration strategies affect the second language learning. In assimilation strategy, second language learners assimilate to the target language group and enhance the language acquisition. In preservation strategy, second language learners reject the life style and values of the target language group. As a result, the language acquisition is unlikely to happen. In adaption integration strategy, second language acquisition depends on the degree of contact between the two groups.

*Enclosure:* It refers to the degree to which two groups share the social institution, such as churches, schools, trades, professions and clubs. The more they share, the better for target language acquisition and vice versa.

*Cohesiveness and Size:* A larger and more cohesive second language group will reduce the opportunities to acquire the target language and vice versa.

*Similarity:* If the two groups share similar cultures, contacts will be potentially higher and target language acquisition will be enhanced.

*Attitude:* The more positive attitudes and views toward each other, the more likely second language acquisition will happen.

*Intended length of residence:* If the second language learners intend to stay in the target language place for a long period of time, they will have more chances to develop extensive contacts. The second language learners would feel it is more necessary to learn the target language.
The affective variables refer to psychological variables that influence acculturation and second language acquisition. These variables are listed as four factors:

*Language shock:* It refers to the feelings when learners attempt to speak a second language. They may feel foolish or comical to use it. For example, adult language learners may feel embarrassed when speaking with native speakers in the target language.

*Culture shock:* It refers to the feeling that second language learners encounter when they arrive in a new culture. They may feel fear, anxiety or depression because of disorientation in a new environment.

*Motivation:* It refers to the learners’ reasons for acquiring the second language and can be divided into two categories: integrative and instrumental. A learner with an integrative motivation is more likely to reach a higher level in acculturation than instrumental motivation.

*Ego-Permeability:* It refers to the ability to accept a new identity in the target language group for the second language learner. The more openness to target language input, the more success individuals will have in second language acquisition.

The social and affective variables address that second language is just one aspect of acculturation. The learners’ degree of adapting to the target language group will determine the degree that they acquire the second language. The relationship between acculturation and a second language acquisition can be illustrated in figure 1.2.
Figure 1.2: Acculturation Model in second language learning (Schumann, 1986)

The figure indicates that there is a positive relation between acculturation and second language acquisition. When acculturation increases to a higher level, an equal degree of second language acquisition will match it.

Some other researchers also hold similar arguments with Schumann’s acculturation theory. In his Optimal Distance Model theory, Brown (1980) addressed four stages in acculturation. The first stage is the period of excitement and euphoria when second language learners arrive in a new environment. The second stage is experiencing culture shock. The third stage is culture stress; second language learners solved the culture shock problem, but some other problem still continues (Larson & Smalley, 1972). The fourth stage is assimilation or adaptation. At this stage, the second language learners settle into the new culture and start to develop their new identities in the target language culture.

Schumann’s theory explains different factors that affect the acculturation. The level of acculturation indicates the second language learners’ second language
proficiency. His theory guided me to look at Chinese students’ acculturation from different aspects, and use the model to interpret the Chinese students’ achievements in English language learning.

Gardner’s Socio-educational Model

In his study of second language acquisition in Canada, Gardner (1985) proposed that individual differences were key factors in second language acquisition. These individual differences are influenced by the learners’ social context, and include motivation and aptitude. This social psychological approach in second language learning was addressed as the Socio-educational Model (Hsu, 2012; Taie & Afshari, 2015).

The model is dynamic and it has undergone several revisions. The most recently-revised model (Gardner, 2006) is shown in figure 1.3. The Socio-educational Model considers motivation as the most influential predictor of language achievement. Attitude, unification, and instrumentality are related to the second language achievement, but their influence is indirect, acting through motivation. Gardner (1985) identified the motivation to learn a second language as two groups: integrative motive and instrumental orientation. Integrative motivation relates to the learners’ attitudes toward the target language group and the desire to integrate into the target language community. Instrumental motivation relates to the desire to obtain something practical or concrete from the study of a second language. Gardner (2006) stated these two orientations are interrelated, and in theory, a learner with high integrative motivation would achieve high language performance. Studies have consistently shown that integrative motivation usually indexes high achievement in second language learning (Crooks & Schmidt, 1991)
Language anxiety was included as an important factor to second language achievement in the latest version of the Socio-educational Model. It is an affective variable that reflects the learners feeling when they perform the target language. Language anxiety and second language achievement have a reciprocally causal relationship. It could be resulted when the second language learners arrive in a new culture, or sometimes learners are not satisfied with their learning result.

Studies of Chinese International Students in Learning English Language

English as a second or foreign language has challenged a lot of English language learners. Several factors affect students’ English language acquisition, and one of the most common factors is cultural difference. According to Tweed & Lehman (2002), language learning varies depending on the cultural context. They used a Confucian-Socratic framework to analyze the effects of different cultures on language learning. Students from China, a Confucian culture, value effortful and respectful learning, or behavioral reform; while in America, a Socratic culture, students question both their own and others’ beliefs (Tweed & Lehman, 2002).
As indicated before, students from China have been the largest international student group in the US (Institute of International Education, 2015), and a lot of them experienced culture shock when they arrived in the US (Huang, 1997). Qualitative studies with international students reveal that students’ language acquisition varies on the degree to which they interact and build relationships with native speakers (Kinginger, 2011; Romas, 2014; Tsai, 2012; Virginia, 2004). In their case study of 17 Chinese graduate students at North American universities, Ranta and Meckelborg (2013) found that the more active the Chinese students were with native speakers, the more successful their English language acquisition would be. By doing so, they have more opportunities to practice English.

The classroom is an important environment for international students to improve their academics and language learning. The general findings in literature are that a lot of international students experienced classroom culture shock when they began their studies in the US (Galeano & Torres, 2014; Tweed & Lehman, 2002; Wu, 2006). This is especially true for Chinese students in the US (Pathirage et al., 2014). From some American professors’ and students’ perspectives, Chinese students are usually respectful, quiet, and pose very few questions to their instructors (Sung & Chen, 2009; Tsai 2012; Wu, 2006). To many Chinese students, the classroom culture in the US is very different from the classroom culture in China, and their perceived cultural differences affect their language acquisition process. According to Huang (2009) and Li et al. (2007), these differences center on the students’ roles and teachers’ role in the class, the classroom organization, and students’ and teachers’ expectations in the classroom.
Gardner’s theory guided me to study the Chinese students’ motivation and attitudes in their journey of English language learning. His Social-educational model was applied to interpret how the Chinese students made cultural adaptations to improve their English language proficiency. The American classroom culture is a big challenge for Chinese students’ academic studies. This study also looked at how the participants’ make adjustments in American classrooms to improve their English language skills.

Multicultural Education and English Language Learning

Diversity is one significant character of the American society (Banks, 2004; Milner, 2009). Immigrants from all over the world gathered together and created a diverse society. In educational settings, students have different ethnicities, cultures, skin colors, or beliefs. James Banks is an expert in multicultural education field. Most of his researches focus on the educational equity in a multicultural environment. On the principle of educational equity for all students, multicultural education has been a trend in the modern society (Banks, 2007). According to Banks and Banks (1997), the major goal of multicultural education “is to change the teaching and learning approaches so that students of both genders and from diverse cultural and ethnic groups will have equal opportunities to learn in educational institutions.” (p. 13) The multicultural education expands the students’ perspectives through educational reforms such as curriculum design, student instruction and school staffing (Banks & Banks, 1997). It enables the students to look at matters from a global perspective instead of judging others just from their own cultural values.

English language learning for Chinese students does not just mean to pass the required exam or obtain a tool to survive in a new society, but to be a global citizen.
When Chinese international students improve their English language skills, they are also absorbing the cultural value of American society. With the new added value, they may understand some problems or questions that were confusing to them in the past (Virginia, 2004). For example, Chinese students do not understand why American students question the professors. After they know more about American society, they understand that this is part of the American classroom culture. The process of learning English and its culture can also affect the students’ judgments or opinions over conflicts or cooperation between two countries.

Banks’s theory points out that multicultural education shape students’ values and perspectives. Because I am also interested in how the participants’ experiences of English language learning affects their values and horizons, Banks’ theory gives me the guidance to investigate how the participants’ values change in the process of English language learning.

Summary of the Literature Review

This chapter examined the literatures in second language learning. Researchers found there were differences between Chinese and American culture. Culture played a significant role in Chinese international students’ acquisition of English skills. Schumann’s Acculturation Model looked at the relationship between second language learners’ acculturation process and their achievement in second language acquisition. In Gardner’s Socio-educational Model, second language leaners’ attitudes and motivation were considered to be related to their second language learning achievement. Finally, Banks’s multicultural educational theory addressed how learners’ attitudes and perspectives were shaped during learning. The findings in this chapter will be applied to assess the investigation later in this study.
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I first provide an overview of the aims and methods of qualitative research in relation to my study. Next, I examine the method of interview as the basic mode of inquiry in the field of education. Finally, I discuss the instrument I used, the interview questions, the research site and participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis design.

Research Design

Qualitative study is primarily concerned with “why,” and it is a way for researchers to gather and interpret information through first-hand experience (Lichtman, 2013). It aims to understand reason related to the participants’ behavior and their motivations, as well as their perspectives. The three most common qualitative methods are: participant observation, focus-group interviews, and in-depth interviews. As a Chinese international student, I am interested in inquiring into the relationship between Chinese students’ perception of American culture and their English language acquisition. When Chinese students go to American universities people would expect them to achieve fluent English after their study. In reality, it is not the case. I am looking for the reasons behind the different level of English language proficiency achieved by Chinese students. In-depth interviews help the researcher look closely at the participants’ perceptions of American culture and their
English learning. Thus, I think qualitative research could be a good approach to reach my study goal.

Seidman (2013) states that interview is a basic mode of inquiry. As a method of data collection, interviews provide a flexible way to get personal opinions in depth. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of those experiences (Seidman, 2013). In order to inquire into the relationship between Chinese students’ perception of American culture and their English language acquisition, I intend to conduct semi-structured interviews with four Chinese students.

The interview questions were based upon a series of mainly pre-designed open questions relating to the research problem. As Seidman (2013) states: “an open-ended question, unlike a leading question, establishes the territory to be explored while allowing the participants to take any direction he or she wants” (p. 87). Besides the pre-designed questions, some extended related questions were added during the process of the interview, based on the participants’ answers. I applied Schumann’s Acculturation Model and Gardner’s Socio-educational Model to design the interview questions. Schumann’s Acculturation Model argued that there were seven social variables (social dominance, integration strategies, enclosure, cohesiveness and size, similarity, attitude, and intended length of residence) and four affective variables (language shock, culture shock, motivation and ego-permeability) affecting the acculturation. The interview questions were designed to find out the participants’ perspectives on cultural differences that reflect the social variables and their personal characteristics that reflect the affective variables. The questions also covered their attitudes in English language learning which corresponds to Gardner’s’
Socio-education Model. Based on Seidman’s (2013) “three-interview series,” the interviews firstly focused on the life history of participants such as their decisions to study abroad. Then, the interview questions focused on their perception of American culture. Lastly, the interview questions focused on the participants’ reflective examination of how their perceptions of American culture shaped their English language acquisition. More specifically, the first set of interviews attempted to inquire into the participants’ perception of the context of their acquisition of English. The second set of interviews invited participants to recollect their quotidian experiences in the US. The third set of interviews encouraged participants to reflect on the meaning their experiences hold for them (Seidman, 2013).

The interview was conducted mainly in English. However, since all the participants including myself are Chinese, we switched back and forth between English and Mandarin in order to ensure better understanding and expression. I chose to mainly speak English because all the participants were capable of and interested in participating in the study in English. However, finding the right word in English could be demanding to non-native English speakers. Thus, the native language was needed to help with authentic expression. With this awareness, both interviewer and participants can experiment with their preferred language of communication (Seidman, 2013).

Interview Questions

The first set of interview questions focused on the participants’ background information.

1. Which part of China are you from? What is the living environment like in terms of exposure to American culture?
2. How many years have you spent learning English?
3. Why did you choose English as your undergraduate major?
4. Has your motivation of learning English ever changed? If yes, why?
5. Why did you choose to study in the US?
6. How long have you been in the US?
7. What is your plan after you finish your study in the US?
8. What was your perception of American culture before you came to the US? How did you develop it?
9. Before you came to the US, did you have specific plans to adjust yourself in the new country?
10. What were your intended strategies of improving your English skills before you came to the US?

The second set of interview questions looked at the participants’ quotidian experience in the US and their perceptions of the American culture.
1. Did you have culture shock when you arrived in the US? If yes, how long did it take you to overcome the culture shock, and how did you solve the problem?
2. What difficulties have you faced in learning English in the US?
3. Do you think other Chinese international students have similar problems? Why? Why not?
4. How do you feel when you talk with others in English?
5. What were your feelings in the classroom at the beginning of your schooling? How is it now?
6. What are your current perceptions of American culture? Are they the same as you expected before you came to the US? If not, what are the differences?
7. What are the differences between American and Chinese classroom cultures?
8. Do you feel your classmates and your professors understand your culture? How?
9. How do you feel when your American professors respond to you?
10. How often do you join in the American social activities (such as going to bars, attending birthday parties, attending church service)?
11. Have you gotten used to the American culture? If yes, can you describe the degree to acculturation?
12. How have you made needed cultural adjustments? What are your personal thoughts on your cultural adjustments?

Finally, the interview questions asked about the participants’ reflection of American culture on shaping their English language acquisition.
1. How do you feel as a Chinese student in the US?
2. When you have problems or questions, do you prefer talking to your Chinese friends or American friends? Why?
3. Do you feel that you have improved your English proficiency? If yes, how? If not, what might be the reasons?
4. How does your understanding of American culture help you improve your English language skills?
5. How did you adjust yourself to the new culture? Did it help you improve your English language acquisition?
6. How did you fit yourself into the classroom culture? Did it help you to improve your English language acquisition?
7. What do you think is the best way to improve your English language skills during your study?
8. Have you made any cultural adjustment after you came to the US? If yes, what are your specific adjustments?

9. What are the contributing factors of your cultural adjustments?

10. Do you feel your values changed after you learned the English language? If yes, what kind of changes are they?

11. What do you think the University could do to help your English language acquisition?

12. What suggestions do you have for the incoming Chinese students?

Research Site and Participants

As I mentioned in Chapter one, I conducted the study at the University of Akron, which is located in a small city named Akron, in Northeast Ohio. I primarily chose this research site because I study here. I also travelled to a lot of other bigger cities in the US, such as New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and so on. I noticed that life in Akron is very different from that in the bigger cities, especially for the international student like me. In the bigger cities, there are usually more Chinese people. Thus the Chinese students can get access to the local life more easily. What is more, there are more activities for the international students to participate in and more opportunities to learn about the American culture. So living in the bigger cities, it is easier and better for the international students to perceive the American culture.

However, as an international student in the city of Akron, if one wants to know more about the American culture, he/she has to make some efforts. I know a lot of Chinese students attending the University of Akron. After attending the classes, they spend time mostly only with Chinese friends, speak Chinese, make
Chinese food, and watch Chinese TV programs. Therefore, if one does not want to or does not know how to be involved in and know more about the American culture, he/she might live here for years and still know very little about the American culture. This situation enables me to see more clearly the impact of cultural perception and adjustment on the English learning.

The study used the method of purposeful sampling when choosing the participants. Seidman (2013) suggests that purposeful sampling is the best way to select participants when random selection is not an option. Because of the research problem and questions, the participants should have sufficient experience in learning English in China. Having a Bachelor’s degree in English before coming to the United States is the primary criterion to ensure they have plenty of classroom experience in learning English in China. So first, I collected the information of the Chinese students pursuing master’s degree at the University of Akron and found twenty students who had earned a degree in English in China before coming to the United States and were willing to participate in the study. Among these twenty Chinese students, I randomly chose four, two males and two females. To ensure the credibility and reliability of the study, these four students major in different academic fields and are from different parts of China; thus they have different cultural backgrounds. To protect their privacy, I used their pseudonym names in this paper. Below is some information about them.

Sam (pseudonym) was a male student from Beijing, the capital city of China. He was in his mid-twenties and has been living in the US for 15 months by the time of the interview. Sam grew up in Beijing and got his undergraduate degree in English from a university in Beijing. He seemed to be a smart and intelligent person from
the way he answered the questions. Sam was very conversable and easy-going. He got his English name in college and he liked us to use his English name because his Chinese name is hard for Americans to pronounce. Sam’s English was very good as he explained that he had a lot of opportunities to talk with foreigners in Beijing and had a lot of chances to know the American culture. Sam said he made some American friends and he liked to go out with them to experience the American culture. He was in his second year in the MBA program at the University of Akron, and he planned to find a job in the US after he finished the program.

George (pseudonym) was a male student from Hunan, a state in the southern part of China. He was 32 years old, and he came to the US three years ago. George grew up in a small city, and got his undergraduate degree in English from a university in his province. He worked in China after his graduation, and he explained his study in the US for the purpose of pursuing a good career achievement. George expressed that his English is not very good, and blamed this on his major, computer science. He said he grew up in an inland city and had limited opportunities to learn American culture. After he came to the US he spent most of his time in the lab because of his major. He joked that he only needed to know the technical terms to understand his courses. George said though he did not have a lot of opportunities to know the American culture, he still loved this country because it has the most advanced technology in the world. Two months ago, at the time of the interview, George graduated from the University of Akron, and was spending the time to look for a job in Silicon Valley.

Lin (pseudonym) was a female student, who came to the United States three months ago by the time of the interview. She was in her middle 20s, and came from
a rural area in Henan, a state in northern part of China. Lin completed her Bachelor study in English from a university in her state. She did not go into the job market after her graduation, as she said the job market was very competitive and she wanted to have a good start. She chose to continue her study for a master degree at the University of Akron. Lin was majoring in communication, and wished to be an English teacher in China once she finished her study here. Lin said she chose English as her undergraduate major because she did not like science or math classes, and English major students did not have to take these classes. She said the first time she spoke with a foreigner was in her oral English class in college. She learned American culture mostly from her classes and Hollywood movies. Lin expressed that she felt very surprised when she arrived here because it was so different from her expectations, and she admitted that she was experiencing a hard time adjusting herself to the differences at the time of the interview. She liked the others to call her by her Chinese name because she thought this represents her culture.

Qian (pseudonym) was a female student in her early 30s. She came from Shanghai, a metropolitan city in China. Qian had been living in the US for two years by the time of the interview. She finished her undergraduate study in business English in a university in Shanghai. Qian worked in an American bank in Shanghai after her graduation. She learned a lot of American culture from her American colleagues in the work place, and also from the social life in her city, as Shanghai has a lot of foreigners. Qian was in the master program of accounting at the University of Akron, and she was planning to graduate in two months at the time of the interview. She wished to work in the US for two or three years to get experience before going back to China to find a good job. She explained that though she loves America, she can only find the feeling of home in China.
Data Collection Procedures

Before the interview, I submitted the interview protocol to the University of Akron Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) and received approval. To collect the data, I conducted separate face-to-face interviews with the four participants. The interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes. They were scheduled one week in advance, and the interview questions were showed to the participants before the interview. I booked a study room in the library of the university to promote privacy, and all the interviews were done there.

I recorded the whole interview process and then transcribed it. Seidman (2013) believes that “to work most reliably with the words of participants, the researcher has to transform those spoken words into a written text to study” (p. 117). By transcribing the words of the participants, the interviewer has the original data that he/she can always go back to in order to check for accuracy. Since the interviews were conducted in both English and Chinese, as I have mentioned earlier, I transcribed the English sections and also translated the Chinese sections. In order to minimize the bias and error in data collection, the completed transcription and translation were returned to the corresponding participant to check for inaccuracy and error that may have been caused during the translation process. The final copy of the transcript was used as raw data in the study and will be analyzed in the next chapter.

In the process of analyzing data, I first looked at the patterns to get the themes for this study. After the interviews were completed, I read the transcripts and organized them by participants. After all four participants’ transcripts were viewed, I looked for the general ideas and put them into the appropriative themes. I provided
these findings to the participants to check the accuracy of my analysis, and I made necessary changes whenever there were recommendations from the participants.

I used the theoretical frameworks to interpret the data at the fifth step. The Acculturation Model was used to analyze the participants’ answers from social variables and affective factors. Then the Socio-educational Model was used to look at their motivations and attitude in learning English and cultural adaption practices. Last, I looked at their value changed by using Banks’s multicultural education theory. The conclusion was given based on the analysis from the three theoretical frameworks, and the findings and analysis were used to answer the research questions.
CHAPTER IV
DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews with the participants. Their responses were analyzed into five themes, which emerged from the similarities of their responses. Then the data was analyzed by the theoretical frameworks introduced in Chapter two. Through the data analyzed, I found there was a strong positive relationship between participants’ acculturation and English language acquisition. The more acculturation they made to the American society, a higher level of English proficiency they would achieve. In this chapter, I first present the findings of the study. Next, I analyze the five themes that emerged from the data.

Findings

Based on the similarities of the participants’ responses to the interview questions, I categorized the themes into five groups: the difficulties that they experienced when they arrived in the United States, their perceived similarities and differences between Chinese culture and American culture, their perception of social interactions with Americans, the changes they made to adapt to the American culture, and the value changes they made from their English language learning and the adaption to American culture.
First Theme: Difficulties in the US

From the interviews, the four participants expressed that they experienced different kinds of difficulties after they arrived in the United States. Based on the interview and transcripts, I put these difficulties into two groups: social difficulties and academic difficulties.

In social life difficulties, food is the first matter mentioned by all four participants. This difficulty does not mean they cannot acquire enough food to feed themselves, but indicates that they have a hard time getting used to American dietary habits. This difficulty troubled them for quite a long time in their early arrival days in the United States. For instance, Sam explained his difficulty adapting to the food when he arrived in the US:

“I grew up in Northern China and noodles are my favorite food. But I ate hamburgers and pizza for the first week after I arrived to the school. I was ok at the beginning but later I felt sick of the fast food and I really missed Chinese food, especially my favorite noodles. But I could not find noodles here.” He then explained further: “Though later I found there are some Chinese grocery stores to buy cooking materials, I have to drive one hour to Cleveland to buy and cook myself. I have a lot of school work to do and I don’t have time to cook every day. Though I found few Chinese restaurants nearby, the food is just catered to Americans. I really miss authentic Chinese food.”

Similar difficulty is also explained by Lin:

“American food is very different from Chinese food. Though I used to go to KFC or Pizza Hut when I was in China, and that was just occasionally. I have eaten Chinese food for more than twenty years, it is very difficult to change my dietary habits suddenly. I am still cooking Chinese food most every day. But I am also trying to adjust my stomach to the American appetite because it saves time and energy, you know?”

The participants also expressed the difficulties they encountered in their daily social lives. The participants complained about inconveniences of everyday life in
the US. Qian said that she had a hard time shopping during her first few days in the US. She said:

“I live on campus and there are no grocery stores or malls nearby. If I want to buy something, I have to take a public bus which is very inconvenient. Otherwise I have to ask my friends to drive me there, I don’t want to trouble the others.”

Lin expressed that it is very difficult if someone does not have a car because everywhere she wants to go she has to drive. This is different from China: “anything you need is just within walking distance in China,” Lin explained.

Besides the difficulties in daily social life, the participants also described difficulties related to academic life. The participants expressed that they had difficulties with their academic English skills, especially in writing and speaking. For the four participants, it was their first time to live abroad, in an English-speaking country. George described his feelings during his early days in US:

“I was very excited when I arrived because this was a totally new environment for me. I thought I shouldn’t have any problem at school because I had a high score in TOEFL and I felt my English was good. But later I felt disappointed because most times I had to repeat my words, my professors and friends didn’t understand what I was saying. They said my words sounded like they were from the text book but this was what I learned at school. …. The sad thing is that sometimes I don’t understand their speech, some jargons and vocabularies I never heard in class. I felt nervous sometimes when I spoke in class because I didn’t want to make mistakes.1”

The other three participants described similar difficulties. Sam said he felt annoyed when he received the professor’s feedback on his homework:

“I really worried when I receive my essay grade. My professor said my ideas in the writing were not clear and I have to work with the writing center. But this was the paper after I worked with the writing center. He probably meant I was writing in my Chinese way but it is hard for me to write in the American way. My professor asked me to go straight to the point but it is rude to begin a communication by stating what you want, in China.”

George said he did not experience similar difficulties because his major (computer science) does not demand lots of writing. But he attributed his low score
on quizzes to his limited English language proficiency. He said that sometimes he did not understand the questions, and even though he knew each word in the question he still could not understand the whole meaning. He stated, “If I could know the questions, the quiz is a piece of cake for me.”

As the participants’ responses show, they all feel that they have to improve their academic English skills. Though they have spent years in taking extensive formal classes of English as a second language, they still lack the real life experience in relation to their academic fields.

Second Theme: Perceptions of American Culture

The participants expressed that there are many differences between their home culture and the American culture. Some of the differences were expected while some differences surprised them.

First, the participants perceived the culture as very diverse. Sam and Lin said they heard U.S was a “melting pot” before they came, and they experienced that during their stay in the US. Lin said the cultural diversity in the US is more than in China:

“Here you can you can see people from different cultural background and countries. This is not only in big city like New York but everywhere, like in Akron.”

Second, they perceived the independence in American culture. The four participants agreed that individuals in Chinese culture are more dependent on each other, while American culture is more independent. Qian said:

“In China we usually have ‘big families’, my grandparents live with us and my uncle just lives next door. Here grandparents live alone and children usually don’t live with their parents after eighteen. I felt pity for my
landlord because I only saw that his children came to visit him three times this year. This is very strange in China.”

According to Sam, Chinese culture is “obedient,” “traditional,” and “closed.” George felt that “individualism” is strengthened in American culture while Chinese feel that “Guan xi” (connections) and collaboration are more important.

Thirdly, the participants agreed that America has more human capitals and resources than China. It is the world’s largest economy, and it is leading the world by advancing technology and super military powers. In George’s words:

“Americans are very proud of themselves but sometimes are over proud of themselves. A lot of Americans don’t know foreign cultures and they felt all the others know American culture.”

Fourthly, the participants perceived the American culture as mobile and competitive. They also felt that Americans overvalued freedom and independence. Lin commented on the mobility of Americans’ life:

“I felt Americans move too frequently for jobs. That’s probably because they want better jobs. But in China, we live in our house for our whole life.”

Sam felt that there was more freedom in the US than in China but sometimes people may be extreme about freedom:

“I felt in the US people enjoyed the freedom but sometimes there are too many freedoms. For example, college shooting tragedies. They focused too much on themselves and competition. Sometimes they sacrifice collaboration and traditional family values to get these so-called freedom.”

Apart from their perceptions of American culture in the society, the participants talked more about the culture in the school environment and classroom. They agreed that there are a lot of academic cultural differences between US and China in terms of interpersonal relationships between professors and students, teaching styles, and assessments.
The fifth perception comes from the mutual relationship between professors and students. For example, Lin shared her experience in her first class:

“When I saw an American student interrupt the professor and question the professor’s point, I was surprised. I was shocked when he asked the professor ‘you see what I mean?’ How dare he do that? That is very rude and unacceptable for me. But to my surprise, the professor appreciated the student’s idea and said he made a good point. In China the professor is the authority and you should not challenge him. But you know later I understood this is normal in American classroom.”

Sixth, the participants perceived that the teaching style in America is new and interesting. They were used to the teaching style in China, and the teaching style in America is different from that in China. Qian confided:

“In China, you just need to listen to the professor and take notes, nothing else you need to do. But here you cannot be quiet. There are a lot of interactions with the professor and you have to speak up and talk in small groups. You have to do presentations.”

Sam said he liked the teaching style in the US, but it was hard for him to get used to it:

“I like the teaching style here it can train your public speaking ability. My professors always say to have your own critical ideas, but I am used to the lecturing style in China, it is really hard for me to get the critical ideas. I know I have to learn from my American friends and practice more.”

The seventh perception reflects the testing and grading on the student’s academic work. The participants agreed that the assessment in American classrooms is challengeable. But they appreciated that the US system gave everyone the chance to work hard and succeed. The professors looked at students’ production and rewarded their hard work fairly, regardless of students’ backgrounds. George said:

“There are so many different styles of tests throughout the semester. I have weekly quizzes, group projects, personal papers and you have to make presentations. In China, most times you have only one final exam. If you fail, you fail.”
Lin commented that the students in the U.S emphasize the GPA. She said she was not used to the testing and grading style at the beginning because she considered herself as a “quiet” person. She liked the multiple choice test because it gave her “clues” to answer the question, while for papers she did not know how to start and give “critical opinions.”

Eighth, the four participants gave their perceptions about the classroom culture including students’ behaviors and discipline. Sam mentioned how he was surprised to see students bringing and eating snacks in class. He said:

“It was funny I saw my classmates eating snacks and juices while the professor was talking. This is not allowed in the classroom in China, you can only drink water. But later I started to bring snacks to class, this is good, I felt relaxed.”

Qian also pointed out that she was amazed when she saw students wearing slippers or tanks to class or walking around during the class. She said this was considered “impolite” and “improper” in the Chinese classroom. But she explained that she later understood these behaviors as this is part of the American “freedom.”

Third Theme: Social Interactions in the US

The participants perceived the social interactions with Americans differently based on the environment. They said most times they were treated fairly in the university campus, but they also said the people outside the university were different from students or professo in the campus. George commented that:

“I think because in the campus American students have more chances to get in touch with Chinese students and some of them know about our culture. Most times they treat us well. But Akron is a small city and most people here do not know Chinese culture. You can feel the difference when you go shopping or restaurants. They behave politely but still look at you as a foreigner. My landlord introduced me to the refrigerator, laundry machine
and running water at the first day on my arrival, his impression about China
is still in the 1960s.”

Sam said that he felt Americans treats foreigners different based on their
cultural background:

“I also have classmates from Canada and other rich countries in Europe, I
noticed they were treated better than us. Probably they are from the rich
countries and we are from a poor country. I made some friends from the
other countries like India, Nigeria, I felt relaxed when talk with them because
we are all international students and we have common languages. You
cannot have that feeling when you talk with American students.”

Qian explained that at the beginning she felt excited after she arrived in the
US, and she made some American friends. But later she still put herself in her
Chinese friends’ circle because she felt “the more you hang out with American friends,
the more differences you will find.” She felt comfortable hanging out with her
Chinese peers.

The participants agreed that most of the negative attitudes toward Chinese
students were from newspapers, TV or other social media. From the standpoint of
the participants, the stereotypes of Chinese have influenced the interaction between
Americans and Chinese students. Lin described her feeling as “awkward:”

“China is the world second largest economy and China’s rise was considered
a threat to America by some Americans. I noticed a lot of news are
describing China from negative ways. Some Americans are judging China
from media’s perspective. But they forget that is the government’s
propaganda tool. I felt annoyed some of my professor likes use China as
negative examples. You can feel that they were polite when you talk with
them, but their thinking betrayed their faces. I like to talk with Americans
who visited China or know some Chinese culture, but it is really hard to talk
those who know China through movies. Some Americans don’t care about
foreigners, they felt foreigners would automatically behave like them.”

In general, all four participants felt that it was very difficult for them to be
integrated into the American society. They felt they were isolated though they are in
the country. The participants addressed that the environment varies depending on
the academic department, even in the same campus. For example, George said he felt relaxed when engaged in social interactions in his department because most of his classmates are Indian and Chinese students. Meanwhile, participants in the business school admitted that they felt pressured as most of the students and professors are American businessmen. Classrooms or the campus at large are the environments in which they liked to get in touch with American culture.

Though they admitted the difficulties of interacting with Americans, they believed the social interactions would help their academic study and improve their English language skills. They felt positive about social lives, and used different ways to get involved in the society. For example, Sam mentioned that he usually went with his American friends to play basketball and watch NBA games because they have common interests. The other participants said that the church and student organizations also helped them to experience the American life. They pointed out that they improved their academic performance and English language skills after they experienced more direct contact with the American college culture and the American society in general.

Fourth Theme: Acculturation and Adaption Strategies

All the four participants said they made efforts to get involved with the American culture because they thought this was necessary. They considered it good for their study and social life. Though their acculturation strategies were slightly different from each other, in general, they share similar characteristics. I divided the strategies into two categories or aspects: social life and academic life.

From the social life perspective, all four participants admitted they made some preparation work about understanding American culture before they left for the
They believed that though they experienced culture shock, these preparations significantly helped them to overcome difficulties during the beginning days after their arrival. According to Sam:

“I felt it’s very necessary to do some homework about American culture before you come to the US. I learned a lot about American life from my American friends in Beijing and I used my knowledge and their suggestions after I came here. I felt I am lucky to know some American culture before; otherwise I would meet a lot of problems. I saw that happened on some of my classmates, they know little about America before they came.”

Both Lin and Qian shared similar opinions with Sam. They concluded that their preparations in China helped them release the pressure from culture shock quickly. Lin mentioned that she improved her shopping skills, for instance, by storing groceries for two weeks and waiting for good deals: “This would be funny in China because you can buy fresh vegetables every day and it is very convenient. I knew Americans usually go shopping once a week or even longer, so I am using the American way.”

Apart from preparation, the participants also mentioned that some school programs and community activities also helped them to adapt to the American culture. They agreed that the orientation for international students helped their adaptation to the new environments, but George complained it was too short: “There were only two days for orientation, it is too short and too intense for international students. I felt there were a lot of new things I should know but the time was limited.” Sam and Qian said they used the school’s “culture partner” program to make friends with their American peers. They met frequently and learned a lot from this program. Qian explained:

“My (American) partner was a girl in English department. She likes me to introduce her about China, and she would tell me the differences in America and how to deal with some matters in America. For example, she invited me
to visit her home during Thanksgiving and before that she told me some customs in US.  I learned a lot from my partner.”

She then shared one story about her cultural learning:

“When I visited home, her mom asked me to have some more for dinner.  I said I am full actually I am not full.  In China this is show my modest and the host should ask one more time to let me have something more.  But her mom didn’t ask anymore and I starved for one night.  From then, I would take the offer if I want.  Just do as an American way.”

Lin said she usually went to the church and she made a lot of friends from there.  Some of them are Chinese Americans and she received a lot of help from them at the beginning.  From that circle, she made some American friends and these friendships reduced her social isolation.  She noted that attending her friends’ activities made her feel life is fruitful, and she did not feel she was separated from the others.  In general, the participants mentioned that they found a lot of help from their Chinese peers at the beginning, and that really eased their homesick feeling.  They felt at home when they gathered together to share their feelings. They felt that and it was very necessary and helpful to make American friends because that can help them understand American culture and get used to social life in America quickly.

Another aspect from acculturation strategy shared by the participants was the meaning of travel.  They said travel in the U.S expanded their horizon, helping them to learn American culture from different aspects.  Sam noted:

“Travel is not just to find something new, you can also understand the society from different perspectives.  We should take the advantage while we are in America.  I visited New York, Los Angeles and some other big cities, I found people from big cities are different from people from Akron.  You can feel America is so diverse and I can understand why people in Akron seems don’t know about foreign cultures, because they don’t have as many resource as New Yorkers do.”

Qian said her travel in the US enabled her to know the diversity of American culture and how people used English differently from different regions.  She
assumed people spoke standard English all over the country, but she realized this was not the case after she arrived in the US. She perceived Americans use dialects or jargons differently based on their regions. One of the examples she gave was about the ordering of drinks. She mentioned people in Akron used “pop” to order drinks, while in Los Angeles they use “soda,” in Florida it became “coke.”

The participants also perceived that from their trips they found Americans have accents. The words and language formats they used reflected their regional culture. Lin mentioned that she had a hard time communicating when she visited a friend in San Antonio, Texas: “They have strong southern accent.” She also noted that people in New York spoke “fast” and sometimes even “direct/rude” while people in Akron spoke “normal,” “slow,” and “polite.” She attributed this to the work pace in New York, which was “fast” and “intense,” while in Akron it was “relaxed” and “slow.”

Besides social adjustment, the participants talked more about their cultural adaptation from academic perspectives. They believed that the adaption to American academic culture would help improve their academic performance and English language acquisition. The participants used several approaches to get used to the American college culture and to improve their English language skills. The most similar adaption approach was to change their learning strategy. Before they came to the US, the common learning strategy was memorizing the textbooks. They admitted that the learning strategy in China was inapplicable to American classrooms. According to Qian:

“In China, most of the time you listen to the professor’s lecture and you make rare interactions. But here I asked questions during the class not only for the sake of participating grade, I have to know the answers. It’s not good to
be quiet in the classroom. If you don’t ask questions, the professor assumed you understood the lecture. I know it’s hard to make the changes at the beginning, but you have to do it. Later you won’t felt uncomfortable because everyone did this.”

The participants perceived that the professor’s office hours and other study group or assistance from the department was a great help in their studies. George mentioned that he used his professors’ office hours frequently because it was the only time he could reach the professors for problem solving and additional help for his classes. “You don’t have this in China, but I am used to it here now,” he explained. Lin said she liked to work with her American classmates in groups and believed it helped her to get good grades. Like she said:

“I like group projects because we can share ideas to work on the questions. Sometimes I know how to solve the problems but I don’t know how to interpret it in good writing. I shared my ideas with my American classmates and we worked together on the reports, we usually got good grades. I cannot do this by myself.”

The four participants agreed that the tutor center was a great place for them to improve their English writing skills. George said he went to the writing center frequently because they could help him correct grammar mistakes and give him writing suggestions. He stated, “It is hard for me to find my writing problems because I think they are all right from my Chinese perspective. But the writing center could point out the problems from the American way.” Sam also expressed that he usually joined the study groups organized by his classmates:

“I like to join the study group. There are some classes that require you to have some American cultural background, and I usually have difficulties to understand the lecture. Sometimes I felt nervous to ask my professors and they are not always available when you have questions. I felt relaxed when I ask my classmates some questions, no matter how stupid there were.”

They concluded that the biggest obstacle to making these changes is that Chinese students care too much about their “mian zi” (self-esteem). They did not
want to lose face in front of others or feel embarrassed when posed simple questions. But once they got started and moved forward, these worries would not bother them too much. Like Sam said: “I always told myself that I am a foreigner here and English is my second language. There is no shame to ask silly questions. Besides, Americans do the same way, what should I care about. Once you started, everything would be fine. I improved my English this way.”

To improve their reading skills, the participants said they made extra efforts compared to their Americans peers. All the materials they used were in English, and they spent more time reading the materials and trying to understand the books. Sam noted that he used to look up the meaning when he encountered a new word in China, but he stopped doing this after he had classes in US: “It’s too time-consuming and it is impossible to do this because there are too many new words.” Now he skipped the new words and continued the reading, guessing the meaning of the new words. At the end he would go back to check if his guessing of the meaning of the new words was correct. He explained that his method saved his time, and it helped him to understand the reading better. He concluded that “there is something you cannot find the translation in Chinese and it’s easier to understand it from English.” He said he was used to understanding the reading from a native speaker’s perspective, and it improved his English a lot.

Qian mentioned that class preparation was very important for Chinese students to succeed in American colleges. She attributed American’s innovative spirit to their abilities on self-discovering. The abundant and convenient resources enabled her to find materials to help her study and to achieve academic performance. She stated:
“In China, I just brought myself to the class and the professor would gave you all the knowledge, you just put them in your mind. There were few chances for you to figure the ‘why’. But here you were supposed to bring questions to the class and the professor gave you suggestions on how to figure it out by yourself. I spent most of the time on preparing for the class and I used the library a lot to find the resources for my class.”

The other participants also expressed that they spent a lot of time on class preparation. One of the disadvantages compared with their American peers was their reading efficiency. They had to spend extra time on the reading assignments and used additional resources to help their study. As they concluded, their reading skills improved a lot since they began their study in the US. Their vocabulary acquisition benefited the most from reading materials in the English language.

Spoken English was one of the problems that troubled the participants the most. In order to improve their English speaking skills, the participants used several approaches to make their speech sound similar to native English speakers. They agreed that speaking with native speakers was the best way to correct their accent. Besides this, they shared their own practices on improving their spoken English and listening comprehension skills. Sam concluded his method in getting interactions with his American peers:

“I like to get together with my American friends. I think it helped me to understand their culture, more importantly, I practiced my English. I learned a lot of fashion words from them on social medias like Facebook and Twitter. There’s where you can learn the word Americans used in their daily life. I told my American friends to correct me when I made mistakes in speaking, and now I found I made fewer mistakes to talk with them.”

George said he liked to watch American movies and TV. He pointed out that it helped improve his listening comprehension skills, and he modeled their words when he spoke with his friends. Apart from that, he also paid attention to how his American peers used the language, and he used their words to expand his vocabulary and his speaking abilities. He said: “I do not think it help you learn English if you
stay at home to watch movies and news in Chinese. You are in America, you should take the advantage of it.”

Qian said she did not like presentations at the beginning, but later she found it was a good way to practice her public speaking skills, and it helped build up her confidence. She found there was a public speech club in business school, and she usually went there for their advice on improving her speaking abilities.

In general, the four participants made adjustments in order to get used to life in the US. Their acculturation approaches helped them to adapt to the American social life and understand the American culture more easily. At the same time, their adjustments enabled them to succeed in the American college culture. They improved their English language skills from their acculturation practices.

Fifth Theme: Attitude Changes Resulting from Acculturation

The participants expressed that they experienced some attitude changes since they began to study in the US, but they did not consider these changes to have modified their fundamental values. They explained that it is because they grew up in the Chinese culture, and it is really hard for them to change their fundamental values in a short period. They agreed that there were some attitude changes through their acculturation process. For example, they began to understand some American’s behavior from the American cultural perspective. George noted:

“Before I came to US, I did not understand why Americans can have guns and why they praise super stars so much. Now I understood this was their culture of freedom and individualism. They believed their freedom cannot be violated and everyone could be succeed throughout personal hard efforts.”
When asked about how his attitudes toward America changed since he came to the United States, Sam stated:

“When I was in China, I felt America is the world policeman. There are a lot of problems in the society. This is what I learned from the newspaper and movies. But when I was here, I found there were a lot of good things here. For example, cheap gas, convenience for traveling. And I could understand why Americans stereotyped Chinese, because they learnt this from their media and newspapers, most time are negative news. I believe if they know Chinese or they visit China, their attitude will be changed. This is the way how the government govern their people. I am glad I know different languages and I can look at some matters from different perspectives.”

Lin said though she just came to this country recently, there were some value changes she made in order to adapt to the American college culture. One of the changes she made was the management of time. In China, she did not manage time like Americans do, she just made phone calls if she wanted to invite friends for a meeting or party in the same day. There was no serious concern about how she scheduled her time in study. But this was different in the US:

“Now I know to make appointments if I want to meet my professors or if I want to invite friends for parties in advance. I could not meet the deadline for my class assignments at the beginning, now I knew how to schedule my time and finish my homework in time. I think this is good for me. I could use the time efficiently.”

George concluded one value change he made was the belief about personal success. He used American dream and Chinese Dream to illustrate his points. According to George, both American dream and Chinese Dream enable personal success, but the process is a little different. He explained:

“In China, if you want to be successful you have to work hard and use the “guan xi” (connections). This is part of Chinese culture. But here I found the success mainly come from your hard work. The connection is not valued as important as that in China. This is part of American culture and it reflects their character of individualism. I like the way here because I am not good at building social relations because most time I stay in the lab.”
As international students, the participants stated that they learned a lot from their friends from other countries. They exchanged ideas and prior knowledge about their friends’ countries, and they learned new things from their communications. One common point was that they could look at something from a global perspective. They started to pay attention to things happening in the other countries. Sam noted:

“If you look the different versions of world map, it is different. Chinese consider they are the center of the world while Americans think they actually are. But no matter who is the center, countries are becoming more and more independent now. The immigrant crisis seems far for Chinese people, but as humans you cannot take it for granted. It may affect business between China and the European Union someday. In the past, I have little knowledge about things in Africa and Middle East. But now I learned a lot from my African friends and Arabic friends.”

Another significant change was their attitudes and motivations toward their English language acquisition and culture learning. The participants admitted that their early purpose of learning the English language in secondary schools was to simply pass the exams. When they went to college, they expected English skills could help them to get good jobs, and they expressed that knowing some American culture was considered “cool” and “fashionable” during that time. Though they agreed that getting a good career was still a goal, they also considered it as a tool to shape their values. The cultural learning helped them better understand the world. Just like Sam described: “Now I am learning that not only to get a good job when I go back to China, I enjoy the learning. I can read more resources because a lot of them can be found in English. You can look at one issue from different angles. I like to learn the American culture because it let know understand why the country is so strong.”

The participants expressed that they experienced fairness and equity from the diversity in American society. For instance, Lin mentioned that she was surprised
when she noticed the general convenient access made for people with disabilities: “It is everywhere, you don’t have to worry if you are disabled.” Qian gave examples about the public services like schools and hospitals: “No matter where you are from, you have the equal rights to receive the service.” All participants said their experience changed their prior knowledge of fairness and equity, and they thought there were still a lot of things that Chinese should learn from Americans.

The participants felt some of their previous beliefs and values, which they considered opposite to American culture, did not change. On the contrary, they were reinforced. For example, Qian said she understood more about filial piety and respecting elders. She used her experience with her landlord as an example: “I felt his children did not provide him enough care, I can tell he lived lonely. I will not treat my parents this way.” Sam mentioned the family value in America was not dependent, and he strengthened his Chinese values while he was in the US: “I did video chat with my families more often than when I was in China, and I usually send messages to my friends in China. I do not want to feel far from them, and I want to stay in touch with my friends.”

They also expressed that some of the values, which they considered to coincide with American value systems, were reinforced after they came to the US. George commented he was surprised how hard Americans work: “It is the strongest country in the world and Americans still work very hard for their career. There is no reason I should not work hard.” Lin noted that Americans are very serious about rules and disciplines, and she should strengthen her attitudes toward that. Sam believed more about personal success because he felt he could put these values in action more freely and with more resources.
Data Analysis through Theoretical Frameworks

In this section, I used the three theoretical frameworks introduced in Chapter two to analyze the findings from the investigation: Schumann’s Acculturation Model, Gardner’s Socio-educational Model, and Banks’s Multicultural Education theory. I used these three frameworks to find out how the participants’ acculturation and motivation affected their English language acquisition, and how their attitude changed throughout their English language learning and cultural adaptation.

Schumann’s Acculturation Model.

Schumann considered seven social factors and four affective factors that cluster into a single and major causal variable: acculturation, which affects second language learners’ English language acquisition. By analyzing the participants’ responses I found these variables affected their degree of acculturation, and in turn, affected their English language acquisition.

Regarding social dominance patterns, the participants perceived that America is superior (dominant) to China in terms of political, culture, technique, and economy. The social distance affected their acculturation process. The participants mentioned that their feeling of being considered as a “minority group” played a negative role on their motivations of learning the English language.

By looking at their integration strategies, the four participants did not use assimilation or preservation strategy. (Second language learners who use assimilation strategy usually adopt American lifestyle and values by giving up their own. Those who use preservation strategy usually reject American lifestyle and values.) Instead, they adapted to the American lifestyle and values while maintaining their Chinese
lifestyle and values. Their adaptation varied depending on the degree of social interactions with Americans. Among them, Sam made the most frequent interactions, while Lin made the least. From my communication with the participants, I felt that Sam’s English was very good in terms of speaking fluency and vocabulary, whereas Lin mentioned she still had a lot of work to do to improve her English language skills.

As for enclosure, I found the participants perceived there are few shared values between Chinese and Americans. Though there are a lot of differences in shared values, they still tried to participate in the mainstream cultural activities. For instance, Sam liked to exercise with his American friends, and Lin went to church and made some friends. It helped them establish meaningful interactions with Americans, and in turn improved their English language learning.

At the time of this study, Chinese students were the biggest international student group in the University of Akron. From their interview responses, I found they were cohesive and the intra-group contacts were more frequent than their contact with non-Chinese people. This was good at the beginning, as it provided help when they arrived to this new environment. But if they used it as the only social contact, and if prolonged, they would not improve their English efficiently. George blamed his slow English progress on the lack of interactions with Americans, and too much contact with his Chinese peers.

From their perceptions of American and Chinese culture, I found that they believed there were a lot of differences between these two cultures. These differences created a lot of new cultural concepts for them to learn, and it took them a longer time to adapt to American culture than their British and Canadian friends.
About the attitudes between Chinese and Americans, the participants addressed that Chinese looked at American society more positively than Americans looked at Chinese society. Sam and George showed open mindedness in understanding American concepts, and they experienced an easier and faster adaptation process than Lin and Qian.

When asked about their intended length of stay in the U.S, the four participants gave different responses. Sam and George planned to stay in America for a longer time after they graduated, while Qian wanted work for two or three years before going back to China. Lin stated that she would go home right away when she finished her program. Based on Schumann’s theory, the longer second language learners stay in the host culture, the higher the possibility they can strengthen their second language acquisition. This indicates that Sam and George plan to promote their English language learning more than Qian and Lin.

Besides these seven social variables, the participants also perceived some differences which are grouped as the four affective variables. The four participants stated that they experienced language shock and culture shock when they arrived in the United States. Their language shock resulted from their fears of criticism and ridicule, which resulted from disorientation when they came to a new environment. Culture shock came from their anxiety facing problems and difficulties when they moved to a new culture. The good thing was that the participants made necessary changes to overcome the language and culture shock. Otherwise, they would have a hard time in their acculturation process.

The participants’ motivation changed along with their English language learning process. In their early days of study, they expressed their motivation to
learn English as instrumentally-oriented, which was to pass exams or get good jobs. Sam’s motivation became more integrative-oriented since he wanted to speak like native speakers and know more about American culture. While the other three also had integrative-oriented motivation, they still expected their English skills to help them in the job market.

The four participants held different opinions on building new identities in America. Sam’s opinion was the most active one. He wanted to behave more like an American, while Lin and Qian preferred to keep their Chinese identity.

In sum, the four participants showed different degrees of acculturation. Their degrees of acculturation coincided with their levels of English language proficiency development. From the conversations with the participants, I found that the deeper degree of acculturation they made, the higher level English language they acquired.

Gardner’s Socio-educational Model

In his Socio-educational Model, Gardner identified that attitudes toward the target language group and motivations to learn the second language are important factors affecting second language learners’ learning results. During the two types of motivations, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation, learners usually could achieve higher levels of language proficiency by integrative motivation. From the investigation, I found the participants’ motivation changed with their journey of learning the English language.

The participants stated that when they were learning the English language in China, their goals were to pass the tests or use English as a tool to find a good job in
the market. This instrumental motivation limited their knowledge of the English language and American classroom to what they learned in the classroom. George noted that he was reluctant to learn English in high school because he found it was very hard for him to get good grades from the English class. By applying Gardner’s Socio-education theory, it is hard for language learners to get a higher level of English proficiency if they possess instrumental motivation and negative attitudes. The language shock, culture shock, and other problems they met in the US reflected their insufficient knowledge of the English language and American culture.

However, by analyzing their responses, I noticed that their motivations and attitudes changed after they began studying in the US. The participants had opportunities to know the American culture through their own perspectives when they were in the United States. Sam said though there were still a lot of problems in America, he started to look at the society in a more objective way. Their interactions with American society affected their motivation toward English language learning, changing their motivation from simply instrumentally-oriented to integrative-oriented or both, varied from person to person. Sam expressed he would like to learn more about American culture to improve his English, and it could help him to adapt to the American society in the future. The other participants said that their English language acquisition was not just used for their career goal, but also for learning the American society. The attitude and motivation changes the participants experienced helped them to improve their English skills. All the participants reported improvement on their English proficiency, although the level of improvement varied with each person.
The four participants took Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) when they applied to the University of Akron. Their score reports met the university’s admission requirement, which meant their English proficiency enabled them to start their study in American institutions. It also suggested that they have the abilities to succeed in their language achievement. In Gardner’s Socio-educational Model, ability is one of the few factors that determine language achievement. After looking at their TOEFL scores, I found their abilities were not significant factors that affected their English language acquisition.

Language anxiety and language achievement affect each other. By analyzing the data, I found the participants experienced a lot of language anxiety at the beginning of their study in the US. These overwhelming anxieties played a negative role in their English language acquisition. But when these anxieties reduced to a lower level, it pushed them to improve their English language. For instance, George reported he was really upset when he encountered problems in understanding the lectures when he arrived. The negative feeling raised his awareness of the need to improve his listening comprehension skills. After he got used to the American classroom culture, he felt the anxiety motivated him to improve his English proficiency.

Summary

This chapter presented the data from the interviews of the four Chinese students. The findings emerged from the participants’ responses to the interview questions. The five themes are: difficulties in the U.S, perceptions of American culture, social interactions in the U.S, acculturation and adaption strategies, and attitude changes resulting from acculturation. By analyzing the data, I found the
students perceived several differences between Chinese culture and American culture. They made necessary changes to adapt to the American culture. Along with their adaptation to the American culture, the four participants also experienced different value changes. By applying Schumann’s Acculturation Model and Gardner’s Socio-educational Model, I found there are several factors affecting the participants’ English language acquisition. These factors include their integration strategies, similarities between US and Chinese culture, attitudes toward American culture, the intended length of residence in the US, experiences from language and culture shock, motivation in learning the English language, and their ego-permeability. Their degree of acculturation to American society corresponded with their improvement of English language proficiency.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, I first discuss the implications of the findings of my study. Next, I make recommendations to the University of Akron community, future Chinese students who intend to study in the US, and future researchers in the areas of international education and teaching English to speakers of other languages.

Implications of the Study

Question 1: What are Chinese students’ perceptions of culture in the US?

Through my investigation, I found the participants perceived more differences, rather than similarities, between American culture and Chinese culture. Their perception of American culture can be divided into two aspects: social culture and academic culture.

The participants perceived that the social distance between American culture and Chinese culture is big, where the American culture was the “dominant culture.” The United States is stronger than China in terms of economy, technology, and global political influence. The social distance created difficulties for them in adapting to the American culture. They described America as a “melting pot”, where diversity is the character of American culture. Americans were more independent with a spirit of individualism. From their perspective, American people’s family values are
not as strong as Chinese people’s family values. Americans focused on personal success, and they put more emphasis on individual success than group success. To the participants, freedom is the fundamental American value. At the same time, the participants expressed that sometimes freedom was overvalued by Americans, and it played a negative role in the society. The participants also perceived that fairness and equality were explained well in American society. Americans believed that pursuing personal success could be achieved by hard work, and the fairness and equality in the society provided them with opportunities to fulfill their dreams.

The participants stated that there were a lot of differences between American classroom culture and Chinese classroom culture. They perceived that the relationship between professor and students is equal. Students could ask questions anytime in the class, and they could challenge the professor’s argument from their own perspectives. The professor respected students’ questions and rewarded their critical ideas. The teaching style in American classroom was more like a student-centered, seminar style class, where the professor guided the students to find out solutions by themselves. The instruction focused on facilitating interaction between professors and students, and students were encouraged to work in groups to find answers. The assignments and exams had different formats. Students could be tested by weekly quizzes, personal projects, papers, or presentations. The participants perceived that the classroom atmosphere in America was relaxed, where students could dress casually and eat snacks in the class. They also agreed that resources in the school were abundant and convenient, helping them to improve their academic success and English language acquisition.
Questions 2: How do Chinese students make adjustments to facilitate their English language acquisition?

By analyzing the participants’ responses to the interview questions, I found their prior knowledge about American culture and preparation for cultural adjustments helped them overcome language and culture shock when they arrived in the United States. The participants perceived that living in the US brought changes of behaviors, values, attitudes, and motivations, and these changes helped them to learn the American culture, and in turn, to improve their English proficiency.

In the meantime, the participants believe that connecting with fellow Chinese students helped them to reduce their anxiety and confusion in the new environment. Help from their Chinese peers helped them settle down in the US so they could focus on their studies. However, the Chinese circle did not improve their English language acquisition in the long run, and social interactions with Americans were instrumental for all four participants’ improvement of their English language acquisition. They used various ways to get in touch with the American culture. The orientation provided by the university gave them a general knowledge about American society and study in the US. Some participants used the university’s cultural partner program to find American peers to help them learn the American culture; through their interactions, they improved their English speaking skills. The participants also used church, student clubs, or other community organizations to build their interactions with Americans.

The participants adjusted their learning strategy in the classroom to improve their English language skills. They became active in the classroom and asked questions when they did not understand the lecture. They prepared for class
presentations, and it helped them become more confident while improving their public speaking skills. The writing center was a good resource to improve their writing skills, and some participants used study groups to overcome their disadvantage of English proficiency. Reading English newspapers and watching American TV programs and movies also expanded their vocabulary. Changing their reading habits helped them complete assignments within required timeframes alongside their American peers in the classroom while improving their English reading skills.

Travel was another approach they used to improve their English language acquisition process. The participants reported travel in the U.S provided them with opportunities to experience the diversity of American culture. They learned that Americans use words differently from region to region. The accents and format of sentences reflected their regional culture.

Another strategy they used was the change of attitudes and motivations toward the host environment and learning the English language. They expressed that living in the US enriched their understanding of American society. This experience reduced their biases toward American society, and more objective or positive attitudes, values, and perspectives were adopted. They changed their motivation from instrumentally-oriented motivation to a combination of instrumental and integrative-oriented motivations.

Question 3: What are Chinese students’ interpretations of the relationship between their cultural adjustments and their English language acquisition?

From the data analysis of theoretical frameworks, the participants’ cultural adjustments helped their acculturation to the American culture. Their degrees of acculturation coincided with their levels of English proficiency development. The
culture shock pushed the participants to make adjustments to the new environment. Their cultural adjustment efforts provided them opportunities to enhance their learning strategies in American classrooms. Their English skills were improved by participation in the classroom, group projects, presentations, and adjusted reading habits.

Their social interactions with American society expanded their vocabulary, and they had more chances to know how Americans used English words in their daily lives. Through their social interactions, they understood the communications, and started to use the language from cultural perspective. Their travelling experiences broadened their horizons of the diversity of American culture. They learned how the English language was used differently from region to region. Their acculturation equipped them with the ability to use the language accordingly.

Their changes of attitudes and motivation played an important role in their English language acquisition process. The objective attitudes toward American culture and the change of motivation increased their desire to learn the English language. These psychological changes stimulated them to make adjustments to the American culture, and on the other side, improved their English language proficiency. The English language was like a key for the participants to open a door to know the world. They said their English language learning gave them the opportunity to know American culture. After they came to the United States, they saw and learned a lot of new things that they could not learn in China. From their responses, I found their social and academic experiences in the US expanded their values and beliefs.
Global Citizenship in Learning English as a Second Language

James A. Banks’s multicultural education theory addressed that students should be taught in a culturally responsive way where students have opportunities to learn their own culture and the others’ culture as well. By applying Banks’s multicultural education theory, I found the four participants to be less biased on social issues than before they came to the US. They experienced value changes that they believed enriched their life styles after they came to the United States. One significant change was that they were trying to look at social issues from Americans’ perspective. They understood that most Americans were judging people from American cultures. At the same time, they were also correcting Americans’ stereotypes on Chinese people or society through their interactions with Americans.

Apart from these, participants’ experiences in the US also enhanced their sensibility of being global citizens. Global citizens identify with being part of an emerging world community, and they take actions to contribute to building this community’s values and practices. They do not only care about their own communities or country, but also about things happening in other countries. They pay attention to the inequality or poverty problems in the world and they are willing to take responsibility to solve these problems. The participants’ interactions with other international students gave them opportunities to know things happening on the other side of the world. They also learned about how others look at them and view China. The multicultural academic experience expanded their horizons, and they felt they cared more about global issues than before. For example, Sam mentioned that the climate change was not just one country’s issue; rather it is a global issue.
Recommendations

Based on the results and implications of the study, I found that Chinese students need support from the host country. These supports could be provided by the university administrations, educators, and community. A supportive learning environment could help reduce Chinese international students’ struggle with cultural differences, acculturation issues, and psychological adjustments. The support received by the Chinese international students could improve their English language acquisition.

Recommendations to the University of Akron Administrations

The findings suggest that the tutoring programs provided by the University helped the participants with their adaptation to the American culture and improved their English proficiency. In response to the participants’ expectations, the university could do more to help their English language learning. For instance, the current orientation program was too short and intense; students felt they could not remember so many new things within just two days. The university could take advantage of technology, and students could get prior knowledge online before they depart to the US. There are some good programs that help students pursue their academic success such as e-tutor and WebEx. However, due to the language barriers and communication habits, many Chinese students do not know these programs. The university could leverage the publicity of these programs and make them more accessible to the Chinese students. For example, they could provide this information in the immigration office on campus, which Chinese students visit frequently.

The study showed that social interactions improved Chinese students’ understanding of American culture, and in turn improved their English language skills.
Chinese students could find interactions on the campus, but they had a hard time connecting with the community outside the campus. The school could organize such programs to connect the Chinese students with the community. This would help Chinese students practice their English, while simultaneously providing opportunities for Americans to learn about China.

Banks’s multicultural education theory implied that it could help students’ learning if they can find their culture reflected in the learning environment. As the biggest international student population, the participants felt the university did not provide adequate care for the Chinese students. Setting up communication between Chinese students and university officials could let the university know the students’ expectations and provide necessary support. A message sent from the university to Chinese students on Chinese holidays could also let them feel care from the host institution.

Recommendations to University Educators

The university educators play essential roles in Chinese students’ studies in the US. Coming from a very different academic culture, it is difficult for Chinese students to adapt to American classroom culture in a short time. The educators’ support, for instance, in trying to understand Chinese international students and their backgrounds could help Chinese students’ transition to the American classroom culture. Their reading skills could be improved by giving additional time to understand the materials. The listening comprehension skills could be enhanced by slower lecturing speed and examples illustrated with simple words at their early days in the US. Their writing skills could be strengthened by giving suggestions about Americans’ writing habits. Their speaking skills could be improved by giving
encouragements and chances to practice. In addition, the professors could encourage the Chinese students to get involved more in class interactions. When assigning group discussions or group projects, they could put Chinese students into groups including American students. Through this, the Chinese students could have the opportunities to learn more about American culture while practicing their English skills.

Recommendations for Prospective Chinese International Students

The study suggests that Chinese students’ prior knowledge about American culture could help reduce the Chinese students’ culture shock when they move to America. For those who are planning to study in the US, it is recommended to acquire some general knowledge of American culture before initiating their study in the US. They could take advantage of the Internet to acquire resources to learn more about the cultures in the US. Or if possible, they could talk with Americans to get firsthand resources about the American society.

By applying the theoretical frameworks to analyze the data, I found there was a positive relationship between the participants’ acculturation and their English language acquisition. A higher degree of acculturation to the American culture usually generates a higher level of English proficiency. Based on these findings, I recommend that future Chinese students should make cultural adjustments if they want to improve their English language skills. They could achieve this by changing their learning strategies, improving their social interactions with Americans, or experiencing the diversity of American culture by travelling in the US.

Chinese students’ process of acculturation to the American culture is usually accompanied by some value changes. It is recommended for prospective Chinese
international students to hold positive attitudes toward these value changes. The positive attitudes toward American culture could stimulate their adaptation to the American culture, which indirectly enhances their English language learning. Globalization is becoming the theme in today’s world (Banks, 2004), and their experience of being educated in a multicultural environment could provide them with necessary knowledge to be successful in the society.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on the role of culture in English language acquisition. There were also some other factors affecting Chinese students’ English language learning in the US. Age difference is a common factor that affects second language learners’ language acquisition. People usually argue that children learn a second language faster than adults in the same environment. This study only has two females and two males, and a larger number of male and female participants may shed more light on the relationship between gender and second language acquisition. Future researchers could include age and gender differences in their studies.

This study was conducted from four Chinese students’ perceptions of American culture. They attended the same institution, the University of Akron, a large public research university located in the mid-western region in the US. This small city culture may not represent the whole American culture. In order to pursue a better understanding of diverse Chinese students’ experiences, I recommend that future research should focuses on a larger size of Chinese international students studying in different regions in the US.
Subjectivity is an unavoidable issue in qualitative studies. I found it is hard to interpret the findings from a totally objective perspective. The results may contain my own opinions. Some researchers argue that keeping a certain percent of subjectivity could help understand the participants further. It is recommended that future studies use quantitative methods or a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in order to attain a more inclusive understanding of Chinese students’ learning experiences in the US.

In addition, the four participants were volunteers, and their attitudes and responses may have been influenced by the fact that they came from the same culture as the investigator. It is recommended that future researches could use different interview approaches to minimize the possibility of participants’ responses catering to the investigator.

Conclusion

Through delineating the four Chinese students’ experience in learning English language in America, this research suggests that there is a correlation between acculturation to the host environment and English language acquisition.

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively examine the relationship between Chinese students’ perception of American culture and their English language learning. The research questions were designed to answer questions regarding the relationship between their perceived American culture and their English language acquisition process. The findings and answers provided a window to look at their lived experience in learning English language. These answers could be used by different audiences such as university policy makers or university professors to better
serve Chinese students through various ways. It also provided suggestions for future Chinese students to improve their English language skills while studying in the US.

By conducting this study, I had the opportunity to look at several perspectives of Chinese students’ journeys in learning the English language in America. The participants shared their own stories about improving their English language skills. They also expressed their value changes in the process of socializing with Americans and how their value changes shaped their perspectives. From a small point of view, these value changes could help their acculturation in the US, and eventually improve their English language skills. From a big point of view, they are playing roles as cultural ambassadors. They exhibited their home culture to the Americans, and when they return back home they could spread American culture to Chinese people. This cultural exchange could reduce people’s bias and stereotyping toward other cultures, hopefully reducing conflicts between countries and bringing more peace to the world.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION

NOTICE OF APPROVAL

Date: October 13, 2015

To: Jeundong Yoo, Educational Foundations & Leadership

From: Wenon McWeenie, REB Administrator

IRB Number: 01-15011

Title: A Study of Chinese Student Perceptions of American Culture and Their English Language Acquisition

Approval Date: October 13, 2015

Thank you for submitting your IRB Application for review. Your protocol represents minimal risk to subjects and meets the following federal category for exception:

- Exception 1 - Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices.
- Exception 2 - Research involving the use of educational tests, surveys, interviews, or observation of public behavior.
- Exception 3 - Research involving the use of educational tests, surveys, interviews, or observation of public behavior not exempt under category 2, but subjects are elected, engaged public officials or candidates for public office.
- Exception 4 - Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic samples.
- Exception 5 - Research involving the use of non-exempt projects conducted by or subject to the approval of measurement or agency boards, and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine public programs or benefits.
- Exception 6 - Those with minimal evaluation and consumer research studies.

Annual continuing applications are not required for exempt projects. If you make changes to the study’s design or procedures that increase the risk to subjects, you must submit a revised protocol for approval. Indicate changes or modifications must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

Please retain this letter for your files. This office will hold your exemption application for a period of three years from the approval date. If you wish to continue the protocol beyond this period, you will need to submit another exempt request. If the research is being conducted for a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, the student must file a copy of this letter with the thesis or dissertation.

[Signature]

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