

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 The context of the problem

Involving holistic, multidisciplinary, causal investigation into the rural Lisu minority students' EFL learning difficulties, a number of instruments were deployed for this case study, including field trips, interviews, classroom observation, questionnaires, and a one-month EFL (also L3 for most of the students and the researcher) teaching experiment in the media of controlled L1 (Lisu) and L2 (Chinese - Putonghua) to the minority students. In addition, for the purpose of collecting substantial and detailed first-hand data onsite for a wide coverage during the investigation, many subjects were invited to participate.

3.2 The Participants

In order to get as comprehensive outcomes as possible for the investigation, the case study involved, by classification for varied investigation focuses, the following participants:

- (1) A county educational administrator, 'A', in charge of local rural minority EFL education in eight towns across the county.
- (2) The school principal, 'B'.
- (3) The teaching affairs section chief, 'C', an informant of the English teacher profiles (e.g. qualification, experience and performances) and also a coordinator for

specific data collection through meetings, interviews, classroom observation, and access to student grade records.

- (4) All the EFL teachers, **'D' (Male-Han)**, **'E'-(Male-Han)**, **'F'- (Female-Han)**, **'G'-(Female-Han)**, **'H'- (Female-Han)**, **'Y'- (Female-Yi)**, and **'J'- (Female-Lisu)** (2 males and 5 females, with only 1 Yi and 1 Lisu by ethnic identity), all being junior college graduates majoring in English Education or other specialties.
- (5) Two FLLD Lisu students, one male and the other female, **'FLLD-M-S1'** and **'FLLD-F-S2'** after the questionnaires were administered to two classes each with over 50% rural Lisu minority students from grade 2 of junior high school.
- (6) Two parents of the students, one female and the other male, **'Parent-M-S1'** and **'Parent-F-S2'**.
- (7) Two fellow villagers of the two FLLD students from the same villages, **'Villager-M-S1'** and **'Villager-F-S2'**.
- (8) A class of grade 1 with over 70 Lisu students, in which the rest, 30% Yi and Han students can fully understand though they may not be able to speak the Lisu language fluently.

Participants A, B, C are leaders, who helped me as informants about China's rural minority education policy, general condition of the community school, and specific teaching affairs of the school, respectively. They could be also supporters and coordinators during my data collection with the teachers, students, their parents and village fellows. A is a Yi by ethnicity, trilingual with good connections to the local Lisu and Han ethnic people. He may be considered neutral in his views about local issues. It was also on his advice that I chose that particular Lisu community (with 70% Lisu population, but not a Lisu autonomous township, located at a Yi village where non-trilingual Lisu speak the local Han dialect to communicate intelligibly with

the Yis). In addition to the sociolinguistic complexity, one more reason I chose this community school is that it is very close to my home place and I can fully understand the Lisu dialect, the Han dialect, and the Yi language and communicate in them simply by code-switching, a skill I learned through my childhood and schooling. Another two leaders, **B** and **C**, were my resource persons for consultation about the school and the teaching and learning.

With the teachers, the parents and the village fellows, I intended to inquire about the students' living and study environment and what kind of support they receive, social or pedagogical, at school and in their homes. The teachers' classroom instruction was investigated in order to understand the teachers' roles and assess their competence in many ways; as to the parents and fellows, they were visited in the villages for information about the students, their performances at home and to see what sort of economic, social, and cultural settings they were living at home, with the villagers interviewed as part of the field trips for confirmation of the parents and students' reporting. The Lisu student subjects were the core participants to talk about or reveal the EFL learning difficulties, and were given questionnaires about several issues that may account for their EFL learning difficulties. The students' text-books, exercise-books and note-books were checked at my request after class when and where appropriate and necessary. Interviews with all the subjects were also conducted whenever available, necessary and appropriate during the three-month data collection. In the end of the collection, a class of students in grade 1 was chosen for my short-term teaching experiment in the medium of Chinese for 15 days and then Lisu language for the same duration.

Some of the subjects' genders are also specified, but this does not mean to take into account the gender factors. However, the student and parent subjects were

selected on purpose, for instance, a boy student, his mother, and female fellow because it is widely believed that most boys seem to be slightly closer to their mothers and girls, their fathers, and traditionally married adults in rural villages are more conservative than their town counterparts in that they would only have friends of the same gender, out of respect and to avoid any misunderstanding.

3.3 Data collection instruments, focuses and duration

A variety of data collection instruments was adopted to investigate the rural minority students' difficulty in EFL learning, considering both the needs and feasibility for this case study, including field trips, interviews, questionnaires, classroom observations, and a one-month experimental teaching of the rural minority Lisu EFL learners.

The focuses of these instruments vary from purpose to purpose over a certain period of time (See the following table for details). Specifically, field trips were aimed at on-the-site investigation into the learning resources for 'EFL difficulty' labeled rural minority students, involving the students and all the other subjects related to our questions, during a period of a little longer than three months. Also administered all through the case study, interviews focus on what kind of support the students receive during their study from the educational administration, the school, the teachers, the students and their parents. For the students' part, they were expected to describe their own difficulties and reflect on their past and present language learning experience, in the same period. Questionnaires were designed to check for any casual factors to their EFL learning difficulty, in just one week. As the classroom EFL instruction involves the community, the school, the student, and the teacher, among the major factors, I also observed how the teachers played their roles in the

EFL education, with all the English teachers at the school, over an extended length of time. For the last month, in order to try out some SLA/TESOL theory-based and elsewhere proven effective teaching methodologies, and at the same time, to give the teacher a chance of teacher development, a short-term (one-month only) teaching experiment was given to the three classes chosen for the case study. The instruments, focuses and durations are illustrated as in Table 16:

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Table 2 Instruments, Focuses and Durations

Focus Instrument	Description	Subjects involved	Duration
1. Field trips	The learning socio-cultural environment for the 'EFL difficulty' labeled rural minority students	Educationist; School leaders; Students; Parents; villagers	Three months plus prior to the case study, on weekends during the study and after the case study
2. Interviews	Support rendered to the minority EFL learners; Minority EFL learners' own statement of the difficulty as well as their reflections on their past and present language learning experience.	All the above, in different modes; Students from three classes, grade 1-3	Same as above
3. Questionnaires	Check for possible causal factors	Students from two classes, grade 2	Second week after interview
4. Classroom Observation	Check for teacher role shift and application of SLA/TESOL theories to classroom teaching	All the teachers (n=7); Students from 14 classes;	From the fourth week till the end of second month
5. Experimental Teaching	Experiment with SLA/TESOL theory-based and elsewhere proven teaching methodologies, and a chance of teacher development and awareness of intercultural consideration in EFL teaching.	Leaders interested; EFL Teachers when available; Students from three classes of grades 1-3.	The last month

3.3.1 Field trips

In all three rounds of field trips before (3 times), during (6 times) and after (1 time) the case study to the county town and the Lisu minority community were conducted in all. For the first round of the field trips, I went to the county town to meet an educational administrator, a helpful and resourceful leader, the researcher's former high school classmate with rich work experience and a good connection with all the local high school leaders. I was soon introduced to the school headmasters who promised to support me and cooperate with me for substantial collection of first-hand data during the case study at the selected school. In addition to his information of local rural minority's conditions and general situations of the schools, he also accompanied me to visit three rural junior high schools featuring contrasting differences and discussed together which one to choose for this case study: one located in the county town with only 5% minority students most of who cannot actually speak the minority language, one at a general town with 30% minority students, and one with 90% minority students (70% Lisu plus 20% Yi) at the largest Lisu community township. In the end the last one was selected.

The second round of the field trips took place during the researcher's stay at the minority community junior high school making use of the unreasonably set, traditional 'long weekdays', perhaps even unheard elsewhere in the world-- by combining two weeks together by which the school has practiced 10 consecutive work days and four days off as weekends since the last century after establishment of the school, for the convenience of the students from far away – 1-6 hours of walk home for the next week – another 14 days. The researcher planned to make the trips for six times, two for each grade together with the class teachers and the students from different Lisu villages. In the interests of gaining authentic information, the researcher

spoke local Han dialect with the leaders and teachers and switched to Lisu ethnic language whenever talking informally with the Lisu students, their parents and other villagers.

Aimed at inquiry about any changes that may have occurred after my case study and to express my gratitude for their support and cooperation during the researcher's stay and my willingness to continue rendering further teaching and learning support in the future, my third round of field trips was a short one over a few days with the leaders, the teachers and the students, together with the educational administrator who may be ready to make a review and summary speech.

The data collected from the fields was huge in quantity, so the recordings were not totally transcribed but selectively translated directly from the local Chinese dialect and Lisu ethnic language into the researcher's journals kept during the field trips by interviewees or topics, as follows.

Table 16 The Researcher's Journal of Field Trips and Interviews on ELLD

(Summary)

Duration: Three months plus (1 Mar. 2007 – Early June 2007)

Location: a Lisu minority community

Purpose: to investigate onsite the learning socio-cultural environment for the 'EFL difficulty' labeled rural minority students, specifically whether any necessary support has been rendered to the minority EFL learners; minority EFL learners' own statement of the difficulty; the rural minority's L2 learning experience through the six-year primary school bilingual education.

Participants	Educational administrator	The junior high school principal	The junior high school, teaching affairs section chief	EFL teachers	EFL teach Students from one class of grades 1-3 with the most Lisu minority students	Student parents	Student fellow villagers
Item							
Number							
Ethnicity							
Name/Code							
Place							
Interview focus							
Interview							
Briefing							
Relevance to the FLLD							

3.3.2 Interviews

Involving all the participants during the 3-month case study of the Lisu minority EFL learners' difficulties, my interviews with the leaders at the county and school levels were conducted formally. With the teachers and the students from the class of grade II chose to teach as well as those with their parents and the other villagers, the interviews were done informally. Besides, all the participants were interviewed mainly in Lisu ethnic language whenever possible except for some special occasions when the interviewees did not speak the minority language, or in local Han dialect upon presence of interviewees from mixed ethnic identities (Han, Yi and Lisu).

With Chinese leaders, who tend to be very careful of their response in interviews with both insiders and outsiders, in order to avoid jeopardizing their positions because of any 'wrong' political stands and release of any 'confidential' information of the Party and the government, only good personal connections with them can procure true responses and sincere support. So the researcher tried to befriend the leaders through the friends and relatives connection network and approach them sincerely very early in the process. Some information could be accessed through a little informal, respectful, and content-controlled chatting.

With the teachers, the interviews, aimed at identifying EFL learners difficulties were conducted before and after the classroom observation of the teachers' teaching his or her two classes, in an informal and casual way and on a one-to-one basis. Typical topics include English language teaching to rural minority students, teaching methods and effectiveness, and possible causes of the students' underachievement in English learning. In order to promote exchanges among the teachers to discuss together and address similar problems and eventually improve their teaching quality,

some meetings were convened at the end of all the classroom observation. Good relations with them was also important for authentic responses and sincere cooperation.

To understand fully the Lisu EFL learners' difficulty, their previous language learning experience from the bilingual education, their learning method and habits, among other information, all the students, in particular the recognized poorest EFL learners, were interviewed in an informal and friendly way, different from the serious and distant teacher-student relationship, during breaks in the classroom building corridor, or even after school by visiting their dorms or eating together with them at the school canteen.

For access to what actual support is available, without which the learners' presence at school would be impossible, and how the students' performance at home and any other information impacts their language study, and then for confirmation of such accounts, some class-wide EFL poorest students' parents were interviewed during the four-day weekends following the student interviews.

There are several types of interview topic lists varying from group to group classified among the participants, also summarized in the researcher's journal (See Table 16 in Appendix B for details).

3.3.3 Questionnaires

The questionnaires were only administered among the students from the selected two classes in grade two, in order to control any psychological factor affecting their EFL learning difficulties. However, due to varied experience and EFL learning difficulties levels, the questionnaires were also given to the three classes for differentiated purposes. For real and worry-free responses, based on their experience and average scoring ranges on three scales – excellence (80%+, or two thirds),

medium (60-79, or more than half), and failure (below 60, or one third), I explained to them at the beginning of the questions my own childhood schooling experience in another rural minority community nearby, similar or tougher in terms of living and study conditions in comparison with theirs. I also promised them that I would not grade their responses and only keep them for analysis of their EF learning difficulties in an attempt to find solutions for them, without communicating the information that they filled in to the other teachers. The last part of the questionnaires are two tables, one for checking the students' self-assessment on their EFL knowledge (sound, vocabulary and grammar) and the language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation) and the other for their actual performance in relatively valid and reliable final term exams administered across the county. Unlike all the rest of the instruments, the questionnaires were the only two quantitative approaches rated by percentage for statistical consideration in this case study.

To get updated, authentic and overall information, lately revised questionnaires were sent to the school principal. They comprise 57 questions ranging over five parts (See Appendix D for all the questions in the questionnaire): (1) English, Exposure, Interest, and Expectation (Q1-15); (2) Social Support, Learning Conditions and Utilization; Application (Q16-29); (3) Classroom Instruction, Teaching Method, Extracurricular Activities and Effects (Q30-40); (4) Bilingual Education Experience, Ethnic Cultural Awareness (Q41-49), and (5) Self Assessment and Achievements. I suggested administering the new questionnaires in three grades, one for each, but only received two classes, both from grade 2. This was an important change so I called the principal. He explained grade 2, at a diversion stage, normally has the greatest problems and these two classes have the greatest number of Lisu students.

For efficiency and consideration of mutual trust, the original questionnaires were not sent back to me but a statistic table was filled and emailed to me by the principal.

In the end the questionnaires were collected and grouped by class for analysis, qualitative or quantitative, for identification of their difficulties and possible causal factors.

3.4.4 Classroom observation

All the classes of the school, taught by the seven EFL teachers, were observed and recorded over a period of one month and one week, but only seven sessions of their instruction were transcribed and summarized into an observational report as the teacher taught the same grade in an unchanged teaching style. For each teacher, two sessions were observed. In order to show the researcher's respect and also in the hope of raising their awareness about teaching in a prepared manner, the researcher did give the teacher sufficient time prior to observation of the first session. But the latter session was not given prior notice before the observation, which, at the researcher's explicit request, was patiently and appropriately explained to them by their direct leader, the teacher affairs section chief, in an attempt to observe the teacher's true capacity in several aspects, such as their English proficiency, input, methodology and awareness of the learner's ethnic identity and motivation, among others. Right after the classroom observation, the researcher interviewed the teacher briefly and sometimes gave him or her some salient feedback or advice, for the purpose of stimulating their reflection on teaching practice and timing adjustment if necessary, at their own discretion.

The teacher's qualifications were checked with a checklist popularly used in China's high schools for assessment of the teacher. They were also observed by the

researcher in their role shifts in the classroom. Here are two tables for the checklist and the roles.

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Table 4 The Roles of the Teachers and Their Duties

Type of roles	Roles of the teacher	Duties for the role
Task-related roles	Organizer	The teacher prepares lessons, selects materials and activities, directs the lessons, coordinates the pupils' behavior, etc.
	Instructor	The teacher transmits knowledge, passes on certain language facts, and informs the learners about rules and meanings.
	Controller	The teacher controls the students, monitors their interactions, disciplines them, and checks homework.
	Facilitator	The teacher explains the rule again roles if the students have forgotten it, provides ideas, words, etc. that they may want to use in interaction.
Task-related roles	Counselor	The teacher teaches the students how to learn, trains the students in strategy use, and promotes independence
	Participant	The teacher participates in activities as a partner and co-communicator.
	Expert, resource	The teacher not only exhibits proficiency in the target language but is able to answer the learners' unexpected questions.
	Evaluator	The teacher evaluates the students' performance and progress correcting their mistakes and providing feedback.
	Creator of learning conditions	The teacher tries to make the atmosphere in the classroom pleasant and maintains friendly relationships with the learners.
Interpersonal roles	Friend	The teacher is not only interested in the students' linguistic development, but as a human being can help them in their personal problems.
	Socializing agent	The teacher serves as a model for behavior, inculcates values and shapes the pupils' personalities, teaches about the world.
Special roles	Motivator	The teacher activates the learners' participation by arousing their interest (this function can be performed in any other role).
	Learner	The teacher keeps developing his/her skills and acquiring new knowledge (this function can be performed in any other role).

Source: adapted on the basis of Kębłowska (2002) investigation of an EF teacher's roles.

Table 5 EFL Classroom Observation and Evaluation (Source: adapted from Ge 2006)

Item	Checklist	Standard Description	Scale					Score
			5	4	3	2	1	
Teacher	1. Teacher role	Organizer, resource, facilitator, motivator, and evaluator						
	2. Professional quality	Accurate pronunciation and fluency, rich vocabulary, correct grammar, and proficient in all the five skills .						
	3. Basic techniques	Neat handwriting, blackboard layout, class observation, role switch, good timing for each task .						
	4. Comprehensive quality	Cross-disciplinary knowledge specific for the lesson under teaching						
	5. Learner ethnic and cultural awareness	Be aware of and respect the student ethnicity and culture while teaching the target language and the West culture.						
	6. Goal setting	Well-defined aims and going well with language learning principles and student needs						
Teaching	7. Teaching design	Student-centered, teacher-guided teaching design suitable for both the teacher materials and the students' levels						
	8. Teaching method (s)	Flexible, modern, integral, vigorous, and effective method (s) toward the goal of developing the learners' communicative competence.						
	9. Classroom interaction	Interaction between S-T, T-S, S-S, S / T-Text etc .						
	10. Classroom atmosphere	Lively and all-involving						
	11. Teacher-student cooperation	Naturalness and appropriateness in T-S cooperation						
	12. Classroom discourse	Teacher discourse quality, speed and advocacy						
	13. Process assessment	Natural, active, timely, clear and authentic assessment						
	14. Feedback	Appropriate feedback informing timely adjustment of teaching procedures						
	15. Multimedia device and courseware application	Appropriate teaching media with appropriate operation						
	16. Learning interest	Ss active participation in the teaching process						
Student	17. Activities Participation	Ss learning efficiency in class activities						
	18. Classroom Discipline	Good classroom discipline and self-regulation						
	19. Thinking Engagement	Moderate density and pacing, imagination and creativity						
	20. Task Accomplishment	Satisfactory accomplishment of tasks through moderate engagement in the class						

3.3.5 Selective, supportive and experimental teaching

In order to partially help the rural students' EFL learning, in particular with the Lisu minority most of whom find it difficult to learn the foreign language, and also to develop local EFL teachers' teaching by sincerely inviting them to observe the researcher's classroom instruction in return, whenever they were available, for a period of one month the researcher also gave experimental teaching as a temporarily substitutive teacher of the three classes interviewed, administered questionnaires and gave a proficiency test. In addition, the researcher also offered them natural classroom instruction instead of separating them from their better performed peers. After one month, learning that the students all could speak Lisu ethnic language as the community speech, the researcher also made use of his proficient multilingual skills in Lisu, Chinese, Yi and English, learned through his own bilingual education in the rural minority context of China, and tried to teach the students in the medium of the Lisu ethnic language in two weeks, in a controlled way, to see whether it would be able to make a difference, motivate them and relieve their learning difficulties rather than to add any complexity to the classroom.

During the teaching, the leaders, teachers of English and other subjects, and even some parents, were welcome to sit in the rear of the classroom. Also, preliminary findings through the previous two months' field trips, interviews and questionnaires and classroom observations, were then applied in the experimental teaching taking into consideration all the factors relating to the rural Lisu minority students' learning difficulties in formal language education and paying due attention to all the students' respective ethnic and cultural identities, whether of the Han, the Yi, or the Lisu.

Table 15 A Lesson Plan for Experimental Teaching

(Designed by the researcher for an one-month experimental teaching in the instructional medium of the minority language at a China's rural minority community junior high school)

Teaching material		Instructional media
Students profile		
The teacher		
Teaching tasks (aims)		
Length of the lesson		
Teaching aids		
Strategy		
Teaching procedures		
Teacher evaluation		
Exercise assignment		
Correct learners' exercise and feedback in time		
Check which of the tasks has achieved and which not yet		
Make up the unachieved tasks at their self-study sessions		
Reflect from the lesson		

3.4 Reliability and validity of data

This case study uses both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection with a variety of instruments in a principle of triangulation (Patton, 2002), for the fullest possible picture of the case. By the quantitative research paradigm, with regards to reliability of the data, it means checking whether the result is replicable, and with regards to validity, whether the means of measurement are accurate and are actually measuring what they are intended to measure (Golafshani, 2003). By the qualitative paradigm, however, in view of realism (Healy & Perry, 2000) and constructionism (Crotty, 1998), multiple perceptions about a single reality or multiple realities that people have in their minds are valued. In other words, the data can be collected in natural, authentic and investigation-purposed methods for reliability and validity of the two strands.

The instruments including the field trips, interviews, questionnaires, classroom observation and experimental teaching, have been collected naturally, authentically and appropriately onsite for the investigation purposes of the case study over a considerable duration, so they can be deemed as reliable and valid.

3.5 Data analysis techniques

A variety of data analysis techniques are deployed for the case study: a. note-taking and journal-keeping based on interaction with the subjects during the field trips; b. one-to-one basis interviews, formal (with leaders) or informal (with others); c. students' reflections and the leaders' review/summary in the end of the case study; d. all recorded with a mini-pen recorder, translated and transcribed into a report; e. teaching plan for one-month experimental teaching.