A Study of Chinese Fulbright Teaching Assistants in the U.S.: Implications for Second Language Teacher Education

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Abstract

This paper aims to shed light on second language teacher education as experienced by Chinese Fulbright teaching assistants (TAs) in the U.S. Adopting a mixed-method design, this study is undergirded by both a questionnaire and a case study. Through the questionnaire study, the researchers examine the needs of Chinese Fulbright TAs in the U.S. by investigating their self-perceptions, backgrounds, challenges, training, success, and suggestions. Through the case of a highly successful Fulbright TA, this study explores the processes of teacher learning through different types of experiences by analyzing three data sources including the first researcher’s year-long observation notes, the TA’s end-of-the-year report, and her reflection on the one-year Fulbright experiences in relation to her growth as a language teacher. Based on the results, the researchers provide a list of suggestions for Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) teacher education.

**Key Words:** Fulbright TA, Chinese as a foreign language, teacher learning, teacher training, second language teacher education
1. Introduction

The Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistantship Program is the flagship international educational exchange program sponsored by the U.S. government to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries. With Chinese being a major component of the many languages in the program, about 40 young English language teachers from Chinese universities are chosen each year to teach and study in the American higher educational institutions. On the one hand, these Chinese TAs teach or assist in teaching the Chinese language and share their knowledge of Chinese culture; on the other hand, they take courses in areas related to American studies and their professional arenas, experience the American culture, and improve their English language proficiency, which they then can relay to their students after going back to China.

Upon arrival in the U.S. from China, a five-day orientation workshop is arranged for the Chinese Fulbright TAs to prepare them for their new role in the U.S. They are required to attend the summer orientation before fall semester starts. In mid-December, they are arranged to attend the Fulbright Mid-year Conference where they meet other fellow TAs, attend workshops, and participate in community services.

Chinese Fulbright TAs are a valuable resource for college-level Chinese language education in the U.S. However, up to date, no research has been done to examine what challenges they encounter in their host institutions, what training they need to receive, how well they function, and so on. Chinese language education is undergoing rapid growth in the U.S. in recent years (MLA, 2009; Rhodes & Pufahl, 2010); an urgent issue in response to this growth is the shortage of qualified Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) teachers (Xing, 2006; Wen, 2012). A study on the Chinese Fulbright TAs in the U.S. could not only render practical implications to improve their experiences, but also offer new insights on CFL teacher education,
which is of particular significance to the field of Chinese language education at the moment.

This paper first briefly reviews the literature on second language teacher education to set the background for this study. Then, through a questionnaire study and a case study, the paper demystifies the Chinese Fulbright TAs’ needs and the processes of teacher learning through different types of experiences. Finally, implications for CFL teacher education are outlined.

2. Second Language Teacher Education: A Literature Review

2.1 An Overview

Traditionally, second language teacher education has, in general, been an under-researched area within foreign/second language teaching and learning. For a review article on foreign language teacher education, Bernhardt and Hammadou (1987) only found 78 articles on this topic between the years 1977 and 1987, among which only 8 were research-based. Freeman and Johnson (1998b) searched the indexes of *TESOL Quarterly* from 1980 to 1997 and discovered that only 9% of the featured articles were listed under the topic teacher education. Thus, they argued that “teacher education has been much done but relatively little studied in the field” (p. 398). Schulz (2000) did a similar search for the *Modern Language Journal* for the years between 1916 and 1999 and found only two articles on language teacher education were research-based. However, the literature review done by Vélez-Rendón (2002) painted a more promising picture. He maintained that there had been “a rapid growth in literature examining theoretical views and reporting research on language teacher education” (p. 458).

There has been a wealth of important publications on second language teacher education in the past three decades, which “help validate the field as such and lay the foundation for a more theoretical and research-driven approach to preparing second language teachers” (Vélez-Rendón, 2002, p. 458). These publications

Many scholars (e.g., Freeman, 2002; Johnson, 2006; Vélez-Rendón, 2002) noted that second language teacher education experienced a gradual shift from the process-product paradigm to the teacher-centered model. For example, Freeman (2002) described the development of this field as having three stages: the period leading up to the mid 1970s, the decade of change (1980-1990), and the decade of consolidation (1990-2000).

### 2.2 The Process-product Paradigm

Prior to the mid-1970s, research in language teaching and learning drew strongly on the process-product paradigm, which is also known as the transmission model. In this paradigm, teaching was assessed in terms of the learning outcomes it produced and the aim was to examine the influence of teachers’ actions on student learning (Freeman, 2002). The bulk of research on language teaching in this period focused on effective teaching behaviors/techniques, positive learner outcomes, and successful teacher-student interactions. Teaching was seen as a set of discrete behaviors and techniques adopted by the teacher in the process of instruction. Thus, the role of the teacher’s thinking, mental processes in such behaviors, experiences, and perspectives were completely ignored. The knowledge-base of second language teacher education at the time was grounded in this paradigm and most language teacher education
programs assumed that teachers should be provided with “discrete amount of disciplinary knowledge, usually in the form of general theories and methods that are assumed to be applicable to any teaching context” (Johnson & Freeman, 2001, p. 55).

2.3 The Teacher-centered Model

As noted by Freeman (2002), the years from 1980 to 1990 marked a full decade of “change and reconceptualization” (p. 5). The process-product view that teaching could be reduced to a set of manageable research variables was questioned and seen as overlooking the role of the teacher and the complexity of teaching and learning. Instead, researchers in this period examined how teachers’ mental lives, thought processes, and decisions helped to shape their behaviors (e.g., Shavelson & Stern, 1981; Labarce, 1992). In the past, scholars focused on what teachers do (e.g., behaviors, techniques, routines), but now they were interested in finding out how teachers cope with the complexities occurring in the process of teaching (Hawkes & Olson, 1984). Many concepts highlighting the role of teachers’ mental lives and experiences took root during this period, such as teaching as decision-making (Shulman & Elstein, 1975; Woods, 1989; Johnson, 1992, 1995), the role of beliefs in teaching (e.g., Freeman, 1993; Johnson, 1994), the hidden pedagogy and curriculum (e.g., Denscombe, 1982), apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975; Freeman, 1996; Moran, 1996), and pedagogical content knowledge (e.g., Elbaz, 1983; Clandinin, 1985; Shulman, 1987). The change in conceptualization was successful in this stage, but this reconceptualization remained to be translated into research in teacher education and new research methodologies needed to be developed.

2.4 Teacher Learning

The decade from 1990 to 2000 consolidated and deepened the understanding that teachers play the central role in understanding teaching (Freeman, 2002). According to Vélez-Rendón (2002), research in second language teacher education grounded in this new
understanding prospered in this period and focused on five major themes: the role of teachers’ previous experiences, the role of teacher education programs and pre-service practices, teachers’ beliefs and instructional decision making, the role of reflection, and the role of collaboration. Central to all these themes is the significance of teacher learning, namely, how people learn to teach. Freeman and Johnson (1998b) contended that “the field must better document and understand teacher learning for teacher education to be more effective” (p. 402). Freeman (2002) maintained that “to explore teacher education or to promote teacher development, one would have to delve into the nature of teacher learning” (p. 8). Research on teacher learning reveals that “learning to teach is a long-term, complex, developmental process that operates through participation in the social practices and contexts associated with learning and teaching” (p. 402). Accordingly, scholars started to reconceptualize the knowledge-base of language teacher education. Freeman and Johnson (1998b) argued that “the core of the new knowledge-base must focus on the activity of teaching itself; it should center on the teacher who does it, the contexts in which it is done, and the pedagogy by which it is done” (p. 397).

The focus on teacher learning has continued to flourish in research and practice until today. Johnson (2006) ascribed the shift of conceptualization in second language teacher education to a more general “sociocultural turn” in the human sciences. The core of sociocultural theory lies in the argument that human learning is a dynamic social activity mediated by socially constructed symbolic artifacts and situated in physical and social contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantoff, 2000). It follows that teacher learning, as a type of human learning, should be viewed “as normative and lifelong, as emerging out of and through experiences in social contexts: as learners in classrooms and schools, as participants in professional teacher education programs, and later as teachers in the settings where they work” (Johnson, 2006, p. 239). Moreover, as insiders of the process of teacher learning, teachers are also “users and creators of knowledge and theorizers in their own right” (Johnson, 2006, p. 241).
Thus, teachers’ ways of knowing should be considered as legitimate knowledge in second language teacher education. Reflection on teachers’ experiences has been reported as a common and efficient way to document teachers’ ways of knowing (Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Freeman & Richards, 1996; Johnson, 1996; Richards, 1998).

Since we agree that the teacher should be put at the center when it comes to teacher education, language teacher educators need to conduct “teacher candidates’ needs analysis” (Vélez-Rendón, 2002, p. 464) in order to decide what to offer at second teacher education programs. The results of such needs analysis can also shed light on the knowledge-base of second language teacher education. In addition, we now understand that teacher learning is not simply the accumulation of research and/or disciplinary knowledge, but more importantly, emerges out of various types of experiences the teacher undergoes. Freeman (2002) believed that “the aim of teacher education must be to understand experience” and that “the central challenge for teachers, … is to find meaning in our experience.” Similarly, Freeman and Johnson (1998b) opined that “learning to teach is affected by the sum of a person’s experiences, some figuring more prominently than others” (p. 401).

2.5 Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) Teacher Education

In spite of the rapid growth of Chinese language education across the world and the acute shortage of qualified Chinese language teachers, research on CFL teacher education is notably absent from the field. For example, a search of Chinese as a Second Language: Journal of Chinese Language Teachers' Association, U.S.A. (formerly known as the Journal of Chinese Language Teachers’ Association) cumulative indexes from 1966 to 2016 yields only four articles (e.g., Thompson, 1968; Jin, 2004; Xu, et al, 2010; Everson, 2012) for the key words “teacher education,” “teacher training,” and “teacher development,” among which only one is research-based. Thompson (1968) called for the need for Chinese language teacher training. Jin (2004) reported a three-stage training program to improve a teacher’s question elicitation techniques. Xu, et al. (2010) described an intensive summer
professional development program and used quantitative and qualitative data to show how the program addressed the varying needs of participants and deepened their understanding of teaching practices. Everson (2012) discussed pre-collegiate teacher development, and how national content standards served to shape standards for teacher education programs and professional development initiatives.

To date, scarce research has been done to investigate the needs of early-career college-level Chinese language teachers or teacher candidates in the U.S. such as Chinese Fulbright TAs or the processes of teacher learning among these teachers. In order to bridge the gap, this study attempts to answer the following two research questions:

1. What are the needs of Chinese Fulbright TAs in the U.S.?
2. How do different types of Fulbright TA experiences influence the processes of teacher learning?

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method design and investigates the two research questions through a questionnaire and a case study.

In order to understand the needs of Chinese Fulbright TAs in the U.S., a questionnaire (see Appendix A) was handed out to 40 Chinese Fulbright TAs at the Mid-year Fulbright Conference. The questionnaire included three parts: background information, eight items that request ratings on a 7-point Likert scale, and five essay questions that look into challenges, success, trainings received, trainings needed, and suggestions for their successors. The participants were told that the information they provided would be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. Their participation was voluntary with no incentives given. Finally, 25 TAs returned the questionnaires with valid responses. Thematic analysis was adopted to code and analyze participants’ responses to the five essay questions. More specifically, this study performed coding in six
phases – familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report – as advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006).

In order to explore how different types of experiences influence the processes of teacher learning, this paper presents a case study through examination of three data sources: the researcher’s year-long observation notes, the TA’s end-of-the-year report, and her reflection on the one-year Fulbright experiences in relation to her growth as a language teacher.

The selected case, named “Monica” in this study, worked as the Fulbright TA for the first researcher at a U.S. small liberal arts college. This TA was selected for a number of reasons. First, she was the first researcher’s TA, which made observation and constant communication possible. Second, she was a typical case of Chinese Fulbright TAs in the U.S. to a great extent. She was an English major as an undergraduate and earned a Masters’ degree in English language and literature. She received her education in China with zero experience living in an English-speaking country before the Fulbright TA program. She had four years of English teaching experience at a university in Shanghai. Third, her warm personality and high English proficiency level exposed her to a wide variety of experiences during the Fulbright year. She was enthusiastic, extroverted, and active with lots of energy and curiosity. She demonstrated no language barrier when communicating with students, colleagues, and professors. Finally, she was highly successful in fulfilling her Fulbright TA responsibilities. She was well-liked by her students and colleagues at her U.S. host institution. On a 7-point Likert scale, she rated “7” for both overall experience and level of success as a Chinese Fulbright TA and “6” for satisfaction towards training received. It was believed that the experiences of Monica were able to provide rich insights into the processes of teaching learning.

The first researcher’s observation notes recorded anything related to Monica that struck as meaningful, such as her previous experience, performance in teaching, tutoring, and organizing cultural
events; her personality, her interaction with students and colleagues, students’ feedback, colleagues’ feedback, conversations with her, and so on.

As for the end-of-year report, Monica was aware that she needed to turn it in at the very beginning of the academic year. In this report, she was asked to summarize what she had done and, in particular, to highlight those areas she excelled in. She was also expected to make suggestions to increase the effectiveness of Fulbright assistantship and give advice to her successor.

The reflection focusing on experiences in relation to her growth as a language teacher was requested at the end of the academic year after the report was submitted. Here are the original instructions for the reflection: Does your Fulbright experience help you to become a better foreign language teacher in general and a Chinese as a foreign language teacher in particular? In what way are you better? What experiences have contributed to this growth? Why and how did these experiences help you become a better teacher?

The grounded-theory based strategies (Clarke, 2005) were used to code and analyze the three sources of qualitative data. With no preconceived hypothesis in mind, the researchers examined the data to look for central ideas and identify a full range of patterns that emerged from the data. The initial coding of the data produced a set of labels, which were then merged and sorted into fewer conceptual categories.

4. Results of Needs Analysis

Among the 25 participants of the questionnaire study, 22 were females and 3 were males; only one participant had lived in English-speaking countries more than 6 months before this program. Their responsibilities as a Fulbright TA varied (See Table 1) and the most popular responsibilities were tutoring, assistant teaching, conversation, teaching, the language table and materials development. Surprisingly, 16 TAs were asked to teach independently, 10 were involved in materials development, and 5 were expected to develop
new courses, which are typically the responsibilities of more experienced instructors.

Table 1: *Fulbright TA Responsibilities and Frequency Counts*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Teaching</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Table</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials Development</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Club</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Facilitator</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course/Syllabus Development</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Lab</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community/University Lectures</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language House</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1 **Self-ratings of Experiences, Perceptions, and Knowledge**

The participants were asked to rate eight items on a 7-point Likert scale. These items elicited information on their experiences as a Fulbright TA (e.g., overall experience, level of success, satisfaction towards training, level of frustration, level of challenges), perception of the usefulness of teaching experience in China, and knowledge of the Chinese and American culture.
As Table 2 shows, the Chinese Fulbright TAs’ overall experience was very positive ($M = 6.04$, $SD = .89$) and they perceived themselves to be very successful in fulfilling their roles ($M = 6.12$, $SD = .53$). On average, the level of perceived frustration was rather low ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.43$), and the level of perceived challenges was medium ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.46$). Not surprisingly, participants perceived their previous English language teaching experience to be fairly useful ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 1.25$) and they thought they had more knowledge of the Chinese culture ($M = 5.36$, $SD = .91$) than the American culture ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.04$). In general, they were fairly satisfied with the training they had received ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.19$).

As the Chinese Fulbright TAs rated highly on their overall experience and the level of success, it is interesting to see how their positive experience and success were related to other variables such as level of frustration and level of challenges. For this purpose, correlation analyses (using Pearson’s correlation) were conducted among the eight self-ratings (See Table 3).
A Study of Chinese Fulbright Teaching Assistants in the U.S.

Table 3: Correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Overall Experience</th>
<th>Level of Success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of Success</td>
<td>.435*</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction towards training</td>
<td>.413*</td>
<td>.568**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Frustration</td>
<td>-.188</td>
<td>.047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Challenges</td>
<td>.095</td>
<td>.102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness of English Teaching Experience in China</td>
<td>-.219</td>
<td>-.097</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of American Culture</td>
<td>.410*</td>
<td>.247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of Chinese Culture</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td>-.007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

The results of correlation analyses show that the Chinese Fulbright TAs’ overall experience had a positive, medium, significant correlation with their perceived level of success \((r = .435, p = 0.05)\), satisfaction towards training \((r = .413, p = 0.05)\), and knowledge of American Culture \((r = .410, p = 0.05)\). The participants’ perceived level of success was found only to be significantly correlated with satisfaction towards training \((r = .568, p = 0.01)\). Therefore, training received seemed to be a very important factor of perceived success.

Surprisingly, the level of challenges was reported to be positively correlated with overall experience and level of success although the correlations were small and insignificant. Possibly, the TAs who went through more challenges were more active in finding ways to solve problems, thus resulting in more positive overall experience and higher level of success. Interestingly, the participants’ perceived usefulness of teaching experience in China was negatively correlated to their perceptions of overall experience and success. Perhaps the participants who believed in the usefulness of their previous teaching experience in China tended to rely on this experience rather than explore new methods, which may have hindered them from achieving success in the U.S.
4.2 Analysis of Responses to the Essay Questions

4.2.1 Challenges

The first essay question asked about what challenges the Chinese Fulbright TAs had faced. Six major challenges emerged from the data: fulfilling teaching and tutoring responsibilities as a TA, adapting to life and study in the U.S., cultural differences, lack of Chinese linguistic knowledge, identity anxiety, and language barrier.

As can be seen from Table 4, thirteen participants found various aspects of teaching and tutoring a demanding task. Many participants mentioned that their challenges were related to lack of knowledge in the common practice of foreign language pedagogy in the U.S. For example, some participants were overwhelmed by “the teaching approach” adopted by their U.S. host institutions or by “the grading system” and concepts/practices such as Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). Others had difficulty in “understanding American students’ needs” or worried about the conflict between their “teaching style and students’ learning style.” Other sources of challenges related to teaching and tutoring included “engaging students with fruitful discussion,” “handling lazy and unmotivated students,” “developing course materials,” and “increasing enrollment of Chinese language classes.” One participant, summarized all these challenges in one sentence: “Lack of training, I was suddenly asked to teach in my host institution without being noticed beforehand.” We agree with this participant that lack of training may lie in the heart of all the challenges faced by the Chinese Fulbright TAs related to teaching and tutoring.
Table 4: Frequency Count of the Six Challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching &amp; Tutoring</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life and study in the U.S.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural differences</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese linguistic knowledge</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity anxiety</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language barrier</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second biggest challenge stemmed from adapting to the life and study in the U.S. Commonly mentioned challenges included expensive housing, limited access to Chinese food, underdeveloped public transportation, high medical expenses, and heavy workload.

Cultural differences figured as the third most pronounced challenge. The participants confessed that they experienced “cultural shock” and “miscommunication due to cultural differences.” For example, one participant pointed out that it took him/her a long time to get used to American students’ “customer service mentality,” which is rarely seen in the Chinese culture where professors enjoy the absolute authority over students.

Lack of Chinese linguistic knowledge, language barrier, and identity anxiety were another three common challenges reported by the participants. The participants confessed that “being a native speaker of Chinese does not mean knowing all the grammatical rules of the Chinese language.” The participants found it very hard “to follow the native people when they speak quickly with strong accents.” Confusion about the role they were supposed to play caused “identity anxiety.” They were not sure whether they were “a TA, an unclassified graduate student, or a teacher.” They also found it difficult to adjust to “the change of role from a teacher in China to a TA in the U.S.”
4.2.2 Training Received

Thirteen (out of 25) participants received no training at the U.S. host institutions and 12 reported a certain amount of training of various types. Four types of training surfaced out of the data: training on pedagogy such as TA workshops, general faculty orientation, international student orientation, and informal help from the supervisor.

Table 5: Frequency Count of Training Received

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Received</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogy workshops</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General faculty orientation</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International student orientation</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal help from the supervisor</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In pedagogy workshops for TAs, participants received general pedagogical training on how to “communicate with students,” “organize class activities,” “develop syllabus,” or “conduct classroom management.” In general faculty orientation, the participants learned about “college traditions,” “student rights,” and “college policies.” In international student orientation, participants were informed of “facilities on campus,” “the surroundings of the college,” and “the city” in which the institution was located. Although informal, instructions and advice from the supervisors were found to be very helpful, such as cultural advice or class observation opportunities.

4.2.3 Training Needed

Nine participants directly or indirectly indicated that no further support was needed. Nine participants clearly stated that they hoped their host institutions could provide more training on teaching. In particular, they were interested in learning from their supervisors, or experienced instructors at their host institutions through “idea exchanges,” “routine meetings,” or “class observation”.
Table 6: **Frequency Count of Training/Help/Support Needed**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training/help/support</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No further support needed</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support on teaching</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support on life and study</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection with previous TAs</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants also hoped for further support on adapting to life and study in the U.S. Possible support included “separate dormitory from students,” “a friendly and eloquent native English speaker roommate,” or “international student gatherings.”

Finally, the participants were interested in connecting with Fulbright TA alumni at their U.S. host institutions. With this type of support, they thought “they could have been better prepared before coming to the U.S.”

### 4.2.4 Successful Experience

Next, participants were invited to share their successful experience as a Fulbright TA. The data showed that participants’ success lay in four major areas: teaching, community service, cultural events, and communication (see Table 7). The majority of the participants (19 out of 25) believed that they were very successful in teaching. The participants frequently mentioned that they were able to conduct effective classroom teaching through various types of strategies, such as “organizing a variety of activities to engage students in the class,” “using auditory and visual stimulation,” or “incorporating stories and jokes in class.” They also seemed to be proud of their success in motivating “less enthusiastic” students via diversified self-developed strategies such as “cooking Chinese dinner together,” or “giving Chinese gifts as rewards.” In addition, they were able to meet students’ needs through individual attention. Last but not the least, they perceived themselves to have “gained knowledge and grown as a teacher.”
Next to teaching, the participants were very satisfied with their involvement in community service. They actively participated in local community activities by “giving cultural lectures in local schools”, “teaching Chinese to elementary school kids,” or “volunteering in local churches and communities”. The participants also took great pride in the cultural events they organized, such as “Chinese Club”, “Language Table”, “Mid-autumn Festival”, “Chinese New Year Party”, “Paper-cutting Workshop”, “Chinese Dumpling Party”, and “Chinese Calligraphy Contest”. Another area of success was communication. Some participants demonstrated how effective communication helped “clarify confusion and help students overcome difficulties encountered in learning Chinese”. Others advised that the Chinese Fulbright TAs should “be honest, direct, and open-minded” when communicating with Americans.

### 4.2.5 Suggestions for Future Fulbright TAs

The suggestions for future Chinese Fulbright TAs could be categorized into five themes: positive attitude, advice on better fulfilling the TA responsibilities, cultural preparation, immersion into American culture, and specific advice on daily living (See Table 8).
Table 8: Frequency Count of Various Types of Suggestions for Future TAs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Suggestions</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitude</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulfill the responsibilities of a Fulbright TA</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be culturally prepared</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reach out and get immersed in American culture</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice on daily living</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nine participants pointed out the importance of having a positive attitude. Typical suggestions included “be passionate, active, and confident,” “take the initiative to do things rather than wait to be told what to do,” “never be afraid of asking questions,” and “do not waste any minute and learn from people around you every day.”

Six participants provided detailed suggestions on teaching and organizing cultural events. For example, future Fulbright TAs were advised to “follow the supervisor’s advice strictly,” “establish a good relationship with the students,” and “grasp every opportunity to promote Chinese culture and traditions”. Meanwhile, they shared the lessons learned. For example, one participant warned that “being too nice and flexible” could spoil the students and result in “repeated absences or requests for rescheduling.” Specific strategies on organizing cultural events included “choosing catchy songs or hit dances that are popular in China and getting students to do group performances,” or “bringing small gifts like red envelopes and chopsticks.”

In addition, it was also suggested that future Fulbright TAs be “culturally equipped” before coming to the U.S. On the one hand, they should “have a good understanding of the Chinese culture” and “know how to describe Chinese culture in English.” On the other hand, they should have “sufficient knowledge on the American culture” and be aware of the differences between the Chinese and American culture.
Moreover, the participants enthusiastically encouraged future Chinese Fulbright TAs to reach out and get immersed in the American culture. More specifically, they should “go to lectures, talks, sports games, and art performances,” “reach out to the faculty and community,” and “make good use of all types of campus activities.”

Finally, specific advice on adapting to living in the U.S. was also given. For example, future Fulbright TAs should “get more information about the host university” and “bring some medicine in case of emergency.” The participants who chose to give suggestions in this category seemed to have had negative experience in one way or another.

4.3 Summary

The Chinese Fulbright TAs enjoyed their experience to a great extent and perceived themselves to be very successful in fulfilling their roles. However, their success was not due to the absence of challenges. Major challenges came from unfamiliarity with the entrenched common practice of foreign language pedagogy in the U.S., adapting to life and study in the U.S., cultural differences, lack of explicit Chinese linguistic knowledge, the language barrier, and identity anxiety. Echoing the from insight one of the participants, the researchers believed that “lack of training” was possibly one of the causes of these challenges.

The suggestions given to future Fulbright TAs, in a way, responded to these challenges. For example, advice on teaching and daily living could help future TAs handle challenges in fulfilling their responsibilities as a Fulbright TA and adapting to life and study in the U.S. Sufficient cultural preparation and cultural immersion could possibly help them manage cultural differences and overcome the language barrier. Most importantly, positive attitude could equip them with the energy and confidence in seeking solutions when faced with challenges.

A close examination of their responses to the essay questions indicated that the training provided by their U.S. host institutions was
actually very limited and rather general in nature. Not much seemed to be specifically designed to address their particular needs. With respect to training they hoped to receive, the most commonly mentioned support was experience sharing from senior instructors through the form of idea exchanges, regular meetings, or class observations.

The participants’ responses struck as the most surprising when asked to share their successful experience. Nineteen out of twenty-five Chinese Fulbright TAs indicated that they were most successful in teaching. They were able to incorporate various strategies into their classes to engage students, motivate students, and meet students’ individual needs. They also gained new knowledge and skills in teaching which could benefit them in the future.

While amazed by their success, one would wonder what exactly leads to such high level of perceived success especially if the training they had received from their host institutions was limited. Was it because of the training the Fulbright program had provided? Was it because of the help provided by their supervisors and lead teachers? Then, what types of support helped most and how such support helped? It is worthwhile to explore the experiences of the Chinese Fulbright TAs further and to demystify the processes of teacher learning. The following section uses one Chinese Fulbright TA as a case and looks into her experiences. Hopefully, examination of her experiences could offer insights that eventually benefit CFL teacher education.

4. Findings of the Case Study

As a result of data analysis based on grounded-theory strategies, four conceptual categories surfaced from the three sources of qualitative data in relation to the selected case, Monica, which were: training, experiencing, innovating, and reflecting.

In her reflection and report, Monica explained how various types of training helped her accomplish her role successfully, which was cross-validated by the first researcher’s observation notes as well. Inferred from the data, the training fulfilled two functions: to build
her knowledge and to sharpen her practical skills. Relatively formal training mainly increased her knowledge. The summer Fulbright orientation at University of Pennsylvania, the Mid-year Fulbright Conference at Washington, DC, and the Chinese Language Teachers’ Association (CLTA) conference at Indiana University, Bloomington occurred many times across the three data sources. From the CLTA conference she learned about “the overall picture of Chinese language teaching in US and innovative teaching methods” and connected with people in the Chinese teaching community. The Fulbright Mid-year Conference was a good opportunity to share experiences and learn about pedagogy. However, she seemed to appreciate the summer Fulbright orientation the most:

The 5-day summer orientation gave me a rough idea about the US higher education. The most practical among all was the mini-teaching session, where TAs were given a chance to conduct a teaching trial, with the help from a senior language professor at Penn. This was the first time for us TAs to practice teaching our native language to foreign students. The mini-teaching workshop offered us hands-on practice and prepared us for what to expect in our actual teaching work. I came to realize that when teaching Chinese to students of elementary level, I need to explain even the most basic grammatical rules that I have been taking for granted. The mini-teaching workshop was of transformative meaning to me.

Monica seemed to be particularly appreciative of the practical feature of the summer orientation, which not only added to her practical knowledge, but also gave her an opportunity to practice teaching. This appreciation echoed with her great enthusiasm in the informal on-the-job training received at her host institution. The observation notes indicated that she thought she benefited more from the informal training than from the formal training.

The informal training experiences included class observation, involvement with two teaching initiatives, involvement with survey and research, and the mini-teaching class for prospective incoming
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freshmen. When reflecting on her experiences, she put class observation at the very top of the list and stated that “class observation helped me most in becoming a better teacher.” Below is her explanation:

Unfortunately, after I started teaching at university in China, there was never a chance for me to observe how my colleagues do the teaching. Therefore, class observation at Lafayette was the most valuable opportunity for me. Through class observation, I learned how the whole curriculum was designed, how the syllabus was composed, how the class activities were organized, how to motivate students in the learning process, and how to get feedback from students, in addition to other aspects like timing, improvising, and disciplining in classroom.

According to the observation notes, when teaching a few of her supervisor’s classes independently, “Monica seemed to have absorbed a lot from class observations and was able to conduct the class fairly effectively by using similar methods and procedures that she observed.” This finding supported the practice of adopting classroom observation as an essential component of professional development schools (Vélez-Rendón, 2002; Wajnryb, 1992).

In addition, she expressed strong excitement about being able to contribute to a teaching initiative. As a matter of fact, it was Monica who initiated the thought of putting her students learning English in China and the American students learning Chinese into Skype conversations. She witnessed the whole process of developing an idea from just a thought to a detailed actionable plan. The following narrative captured some of her excitement:

When I first thought of this idea, it came out of nowhere and I didn’t have a well-thought plan on how to do it. But Dr. Luo was very supportive and consulted some experts in the field and referred to quite a number of academic journals before finally coming up with a detailed plan and integrating the Chinese-American program into syllabus. After a semester of launching them, I learned about what resources to turn to when a new idea
comes out, and how to accommodate students’ concerns in initiating a new task.

At the end of the semester, she participated as a co-presenter in presenting the initiative at a department lunch workshop upon invitation. She thought this presentation gave her a good opportunity to “systematically reflect on and summarize the projects from an objective perspective.” She also learned how to “structure a presentation in an organized and audience-friendly way.”

Interestingly, she found “involvement with survey and research” a very valuable experience although the role of a Fulbright TA does not require any research component. She demonstrated great interest in doing research with her supervisor, who, in her opinion, was “full of research ideas.”

She [her supervisor] is keen at discovering research subjects that I would never think about and good at integrating teaching with research. From her I learned how to find research subjects and develop research ideas. Moreover, involvement with the survey also gave me an opportunity to learn about designing valid questionnaires as well as analyzing and interpreting data by using SPSS. All these taught me how to do research through actual hands-on work.

As can be seen, the type of research she was involved in was mainly classroom-based teacher research. She saw great value in this type of research and was eager to be equipped with the skills for conducting similar research. The observation notes recorded that she admired her supervisor’s ability in conducting such research under various contexts. Many scholars (e.g., Freeman, 1998; Richards, 1998) advocated classroom-based research as a tool for language teacher development, which seemed to be supported by the perceptions of Monica.

The mini-class for prospective freshmen was also on her list of valuable experiences although this was just a one-time 45-minute class. Her supervisor structured the class and prepared the
PowerPoint slides, but she was invited to provide input and co-teach the class. Through the cooperation with her supervisor in instructing the mini-class, she learned “how to do a class in both an informative and interesting way.” She also realized the importance of cooperation and communication in co-teaching.

At Monica’s host institution, the supervisor actively involved Monica in real-life projects and guided her through them by modeling, outlining the process, providing the overall framework, or structuring the procedures. Meanwhile, Monica was given enough freedom to demonstrate her agency.

If the category of training (formal & informal) addressed support that could be gained from outside resources, the remaining three categories (i.e., experiencing, reflecting, and innovating) covered teacher learning through self-discovery from the end of the TA herself.

Monica took every possible opportunity to experience the American culture. The theme of “experiencing” repeatedly occurred across the three data sources under varied contexts. As shown in the quotation below, she saw great value in her full immersion with the campus and community.

I was “all-in” in terms of campus and community activities including lectures, talks, art performances, social gatherings, and sports games, which enabled me to experience in person the American campus and social culture. Such experiences deepened my understanding of the American culture and smoothened my interaction and communication with the American students and colleagues, and will also benefit my teaching in China as I will be able to share my understanding of the American culture with Chinese students.

“Experiencing” was also one of the most popular suggestions the Fulbright TAs gave to their successors in the questionnaire study. As the above quotation shows, “experiencing” kills three birds with one stone: learning American culture, facilitating the role as a Fulbright TA, and benefiting future teaching in China. In Freeman
and Johnson’s (1998b) proposal of the knowledge-base of language teacher education, the social context is an essential component. “Experiencing” could also be a very good way to gain “an understanding of schools and schooling as the social and cultural contexts for teacher learning” (Freeman & Johnson, 1998b, p. 408).

Tutoring and organizing cultural events were Monica’s two major responsibilities as a Fulbright TA. For both responsibilities, her supervisor provided little training but minimum materials and information. However, she achieved great success in these two areas as evidenced by the feedback of her students and colleagues. As the observations notes indicated, “innovating” was the key to her success. She held a high level of energy in seeking innovation and finding new ways to do her job better. One of the colleagues commented that she was “gamed for everything.” She created lots of ideas on cultural events that her host institution never did before such as the calligraphy contest and paper-cutting workshop. She held a dumpling party open to the whole campus where she and the American students prepared the dumplings from scratch, but she confessed later that she had never wrapped a single dumpling in her life before this event. Initiating the thought of Skype conversations between her students in China and the U.S. was another example of innovation. In addition, she developed a variety of strategies to engage and motivate students during the tutorials. For example, she wrote her own tongue twisters to help students practice the most problematic sounds. She designed a fortune teller to “punish” students who failed reading-aloud tests. In the questionnaire study, the top suggestion given to future Fulbright TAs was positive attitude, which nicely corresponded to the theme of “innovating.” Only when one has a very positive attitude, one is eager to learn, change, and innovate.

But when one has positive attitude, will innovation and success happen automatically? The data indicated that Monica applied another very important skill, “reflecting.” The observation notes recorded that she constantly related her previous teaching experience in China to the teaching context in the U.S., thought
deeply about the possible causes of existing problems, and sought solutions to address them by consulting her supervisor and other colleagues. For example, it could be implied from the following description of her tutoring experience that the skill of reflecting was frequently used.

Tutorial was the most important part of my work as a TA. With 15 minutes for each student every week, tutorial was a highly interactive session between me and every student. What I gained most from such experiences was how to discover and identify each individual’s advantages and problems and customize my teaching accordingly. As learning styles and proficiency levels differ among students, the tutorial materials and my expectations should be tailor-made for each individual. The 1:1 tutorial gave me the maximal opportunity to practice the personalized teaching methods, to reflect on what works and what doesn’t, and make adjustments wherever improvement is needed. In addition, the tutorial work forced me to constantly innovate and diversify my ways of doing it in order to make the repetitive work interesting and efficient.

She was also trained to do some amount of reflection such as writing the end-of-year report and the reflection on her year-long experiences. It emerged from the data that reflecting was a skill that helped her succeed in her role and grow as a teacher. This finding provided empirical evidence for “the reflective approach” of second language teacher education advocated by a number of scholars (e.g., Richards & Lockert, 1996; Stanley, 1998; Vélez-Rendón, 2002).

5. Conclusion, Implications, and Limitations

The questionnaire study showed that the Chinese Fulbright TAs presented as a group of early-career teachers perceiving themselves to be very successful in fulfilling their role, especially in teaching. They received limited training from their U.S. host institutions and they were faced with a wide range of challenges. It is then interesting to see what contributes to such a high level of
perceived success. Then, the researchers used a highly successful Fulbright TA as a case and examined her growth as a teacher through various types of experiences. It was found that training, experiencing, innovating, and reflecting shaped the processes of her teacher learning and contributed to her success as a Fulbright TA. Thus, solid training for Chinese Fulbright TAs should address their challenges and incorporate knowledge about the processes of teacher learning gained from the case study. As Fulbright TAs face similar challenges with other CFL teacher candidates, here is a list of suggestions for CFL teacher education, which also applies to second language teacher education in general.

First, a qualified CFL teacher needs to be equipped with various types of knowledge, including pedagogical knowledge, cultural knowledge, linguistic knowledge, and contextual knowledge. Pedagogical knowledge refers to knowledge on second language acquisition, the second language learner, classroom instruction, and foreign language pedagogy. Cultural knowledge entails knowledge of the American culture, the Chinese culture, and the differences between them. Linguistic knowledge is the explicit knowledge of the Chinese grammar and pedagogical grammar. Contextual knowledge involves knowing about the specific teaching context. For the Chinese Fulbright TAs, it means adapting to life and study in the U.S. and the culture of the U.S. host institutions. To equip teacher candidates with the above mentioned different types of knowledge, workshops, orientations, and classes could be designed to impart knowledge and provide relevant resources. The participants in the questionnaire study referred to this form of training as “formal training,” where candidates sit, listen, and absorb.

Second, it is critical for teacher candidates to have opportunity to sharpen their practical skills. An efficient way to develop practical skills is by “doing” things in real contexts. For example, class observation, direct contact and idea exchanges with experienced instructors, engagement with teaching initiatives, involvement with teacher-research project, and teaching mini-classes were all reported to be rewarding experiences. The participants
benefited greatly from this form of “informal training.” They considered it “training” in that they were guided; they viewed it as “informal” because they were given sufficient room to use their own creativity and agency. Rather than being told what to do according to a set of predestined rules, teacher candidates should be guided on an open-ended journey full of challenges and possibilities.

Third, culture is a key concept in second language education. Culture could be taught, but it is better experienced, whether it is the American culture, cultural differences, or campus culture. “Experiencing the culture” is a theme repeatedly occurring in the questionnaire study and the three data sources related to the case study. Teacher candidates should be encouraged to immerse themselves into the culture of the target language and the culture of the specific teaching context.

Fourth, teacher candidates eventually need to face the challenge independently and be responsible for their own growth. Second language teacher educators should empower them with life-long skills to grow as a teacher on their own. Reflection is one of such skills. The skill of reflection should be trained and practiced among teacher candidates so that they see themselves as “active agents of their learning-to-teach processes” (Vélez-Rendón, 2002, p. 463) and are better prepared for continuous self-growth. Action research and other types of classroom-based teacher research could also be considered as skills for sustaining life-long self-development as a teacher (Freeman, 1998; Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

Last but not least, teacher candidates should be affectively prepared. Positive attitude was the most popular advice given to future Fulbright TAs in the questionnaire study. The case study showed that willingness to innovate was an important factor contributing to success. Teacher candidates should be educated with the value of being positive, passionate, open-minded, and creative. Teachers with these characteristics are more likely to reflect, innovate, pursue continuous self-development, and succeed as a teacher.
Although this study gives us some interesting insights on CFL teacher training and second language teacher education, caution should be taken when applying the results to other contexts due to a few limitations. First, the number of participants for the questionnaire study \((N = 25)\) was small and Chinese Fulbright TAs were a very special group of early-career teachers, so the findings may not be generalizable to other situations. The story of the selected case was special in a way as she demonstrated a higher level of English language proficiency than a typical Fulbright TA. More cases of various levels of English language proficiency from different types of institutions and backgrounds may provide a richer picture. Second, due to logistic reasons, the questionnaire was handed out at the Mid-year Fulbright Conference rather than at the end of the academic year. In addition, the researchers were not able to conduct follow-up interviews with the participants in the questionnaire study, which could otherwise provide more meaningful data. Third, the data sources for the case study came from the first researcher’s observation notes and two documents written by the TA at the end of the year. Weekly-based year-long journals from the TA could have potentially provided richer data. Finally, the first researcher was actually the supervisor of the TA selected for the case study. While this case allowed the first researcher’s close observation of the TA and meaningful interpretation of the report and reflection written by the TA, there was a risk that the TA wrote things down to please the researcher. Future studies may be designed to address these limitations.

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Appendix A: The Chinese Fulbright TA Survey

Name: _______________________

Email Address: ______________________________

Institution in the U.S.: ______________________________

Institution in China: ______________________________

Gender:  □ Female  □ Male

Are you willing to participate in any follow-up interviews?  □ Yes  □ NO

Have you ever spent more than 6 months living in English-speaking countries before this program?  □ Yes  □ NO

What are your responsibilities as a Fulbright TA at your current U.S. institution?

□ Teaching  □ Assistant Teaching  □ Tutoring
□ Conversation  □ Language Lab  □ Language Table
□ Language Club  □ Language House
□ Community/University Lectures  □ Group Facilitator
□ Course/Syllabus Development  □ Materials Development
□ Other (please specify) __________________________________________

1. On a scale of 1-7, please rate your overall experience as Fulbright TA.
   Very Bad  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  Very Good

2. On a scale of 1-7, please rate your success in accomplishing your responsibilities as a Fulbright TA.
   Very unsuccessful  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  Very successful

3. On a scale of 1-7, please rate your satisfaction towards the training you have received as a Fulbright TA from your U.S. institution.
   Very unsatisfied  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  Very Satisfied
4. On a scale of 1-7, please rate the level of frustration as a Fulbright TA.
   Very low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very high

5. On a scale of 1-7, please rate the level of challenges you have been facing as a Fulbright TA.
   Very unchallenging 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very challenging

6. On a scale of 1-7, please rate to what degree your English teaching experience helps your role as a Chinese Fulbright TA.
   Very unhelpful 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very helpful

7. On a scale of 1-7, please rate your level of knowledge of American culture before this program.
   Very low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very high

   On a scale of 1-7, please rate your level of knowledge of Chinese culture before this program.
   Very low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very high

8. What challenges have you been facing as a Fulbright TA?

9. Have you received any training as a Fulbright TA at your current U.S. institution? If yes, what types of training are particularly helpful for fulfilling your role as a Fulbright TA?

10. What training/support/help can your current U.S. institution further provide to help you better deal with the challenges?

11. In which aspects (e.g., teaching, cultural events, communication, community) are you particularly successful as a Fulbright TA? Please share your successful experience.

12. What are the suggestions that you would like to give to your successor (i.e., next Fulbright TA) at your current U.S. institution?