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## Contextualizing Generic Pedagogical Knowledge through Tension-focused Reflection: A Self-study

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*Abstract: A major concern in recent decades is that teachers are equipped with pedagogical knowledge through pre-service teacher education programs but know nothing about how to put pedagogical knowledge into their own teaching scenarios. Hence, an increasing attention has been attached to teachers' contextualized understanding of pedagogical knowledge for effective teaching. Reflection has often been recommended as an instrument for constructing teachers' context-specific knowledge of teaching. This self-study has identified an approach of reflection by which I, as a beginning Chinese language teacher-researcher, employed to develop contextualized understanding of a generic pedagogical model known as Quality Teaching (QT). The essence of such reflection, named as tension-focused reflection, is to reflect on and then manage tensions arising from implementing the generic pedagogical model in my own teaching. Tension-focused reflection enhanced my contextualization of QT in Chinese language classroom by prompting deep thinking about the contextual restrictions for implementing QT, the subject-specific usefulness of QT, and the consequences of such implementation on subject-specific practice. Yielded by such thinking was my contextualized application of QT that was useful for my teaching Chinese as a foreign language. While unfolding the process of developing and applying tension-focused reflection, this self-study also confirmed the value of teacher reflection for beginning teachers' development and encouraged teachers' innovative approaches of reflection which meets their own needs.*

### Introduction

Theoretical knowledge of pedagogy constitutes an essential part of teacher education. Nevertheless, teaching is highly contextualized rather than standardized work given the complexity of classroom shaped by a variety of factors such as subjects and student group. Having theoretical knowledge of pedagogy is insufficient for effective teaching. It has been documented for many years that there is a disparity between theory and practice in teacher education and student teachers experienced reality shock and complained about the limited relevance of teacher education to real teaching at schools (Allen, 2009; Barone, Berliner, Blanchard, Casanova, & McGowan, 1996; Cochran-Smith, 2005; Kalantzis, Cope, & Harvey, 2003; Korthagen, Loughran & Russell 2006; Louden et al., 2005; Neville, Sherman, & Cohen, 2005; Sandlin, Young, & Karge, 1992; Veenman, 1984). How to help teachers to put theory into practice has become a major concern of teacher educators. Compared with generic pedagogical knowledge, contextualized understanding of pedagogy knowledge seems to have greater practical significance for individual teachers. Hence, constructing contextualized

understanding of pedagogical knowledge is an essential step for teachers to put theory into practice. Shulman (1986), the developer of the concept *pedagogical content knowledge (PCK)*, is a representative of scholars who advocated contextualized understanding of pedagogical knowledge. PCK is the intersection of knowledge of subject matter (content) and knowledge of general pedagogy (pedagogy) (Shulman, 1986). Cochran et al. (1993, p. 1) explained PCK as “the manner in which teachers relate their pedagogical knowledge to their subject matter knowledge in the school context, for the teaching of specific students”. In this sense, PCK represents the contextualized application of general pedagogical knowledge in teaching particular subject matters. Despite of the recognized importance of teachers’ contextualized understanding of pedagogical knowledge, the process by which teachers construct such understanding requires further investigation.

This article will present an approach that I used to develop contextualized understanding of a generic pedagogical model. The essence of such approach is to reflect on tensions arising from implementing the generic pedagogical model in my own teaching. While unfolding the process of developing and applying tension-focused reflection, this article will highlight the value of tensions for triggering teachers’ in-depth thinking about real classroom issues and for promoting self-directed learning towards effective practice.

#### **Background: Learning the Generic Pedagogical Model *Quality Teaching (QT)***

As a generic pedagogical model developed by New South Wales Department of Education and Communities (NSW DEC) for upgrading teacher quality across the state, the *Quality Teaching (QT)* model has been introduced to all teachers in New South Wales through both pre-service and in-service professional learning since 2003. From 2010 to 2013, I participated in a research-oriented postgraduate Chinese language teacher education program organized jointly by a local university and NSW DEC. Different from other teacher education programs in Australia, student teachers in this program undertook teacher research while teaching at local public schools to obtain a research degree. While participating in this program, I taught Chinese language as a foreign language to K-6 non-Chinese background students in a Western Sydney primary school and undertook a teacher self-study at the same time. Candidates in this program were all native speakers of Chinese who had no teaching experience in Australia. Prior to teaching in the real classroom, NSW DEC introduced local school systems and education policy to us. QT was introduced to us as a guidance for teaching effectively in NSW. QT aims at describing effective teacher practice by outlining the characteristics of effective pedagogy identified in previous research. A detailed analysis of the research background of QT elements is provided in *Quality Teaching in NSW public schools: An annotated bibliography (2003)*. In QT model, identified characteristics of effective pedagogy have been summarized into three dimensions and eighteen elements. According to the three dimensions, high-quality pedagogy promotes high levels of *intellectual quality, quality learning environment* and *significance* of learning. The three dimensions have been further elaborated through eighteen elements including *deep knowledge, deep understanding, problematic knowledge, higher-order thinking, metalanguage, substantive communication, explicit quality criteria, engagement, high expectation, social support, students’ self-regulation, student direction, background knowledge, cultural knowledge, knowledge integration, inclusivity, connectedness and narrative* (see NSW DEC, 2006). Teachers in NSW schools are highly encouraged by NSW DEC to use QT for reflecting on their own teaching.

Despite of the reported positive outcomes of teacher professional development based on QT (See Beveridge, 2005; Bleeck, 2005; Brandtman, 2009; Corcoran, 2009; Fogarty, 2009;

Foley, 2009; Gambley, 2005; Johnstone, 2005; Joske, 2005; Kokkalis, 2009; Maquired & Bodel, 2009; Mills, 2005; Negroh, 2005; Ponder, 2005; Prasad, 2005; Smith, 2009; Thurston, 2005), subject-specific application of QT in the classroom as well as how teachers interact with QT through reflection was rarely explored in existing literature. The developers of the QT model claimed that QT is “a model for pedagogy that can be applied from Kindergarten to Year 12 and across all key learning areas” (NSW DEC, 2008, p. 3). However, Gore (2006) found that in reality, some teachers consider QT as a set of teaching strategies that may not be universally applicable. The model has been rejected by some teachers because the teachers considered it as not practical enough and would like more examples of high-quality lessons to guide their implementation of QT (Gore, 2006). Some teachers refused to use QT simply because they wanted to avoid the disturbance resulting from being challenged by QT (Gore, 2006).

As a foreign language teacher working in NSW public schools, I was highly encouraged by NSW DEC to implement QT framework in my teaching of Chinese. Nevertheless, subject-specific examples of QT implementation were not provided to me. It was then that I took the initiative to contextualize QT in Chinese language teaching and started the 3-year self-study. This article is based on a thesis produced from the 3-year study (see Chen, 2013).

## Methodology

I employed self-study—“a systematic research methodology that attempts to examine and improve professional practice settings” (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009, p. 103) to investigate my contextualization of QT in Chinese language teaching. Self-study helps teachers to “find meaningful ways of researching their own practice and to better understand the complex nature of teaching and learning about teaching” (Loughran, 2006, p. 48).

LaBoskey (2004) named five elements of self-study: (1) self-initiated and focused (2) improvement-aimed (3) interactive (4) multiple methods (5) validity based on trustworthiness. Now I am going to describe my self-study based on these five elements. The current study was initiated based on my realization that there is a lack of subject-specific guidance on classroom implementation of QT. The focus of the study was on my own teaching, with the aim of improving my teaching by developing contextualized understanding of QT. The interactive aspect of my self-study lied in my interaction with “non-self” evidence I collected students’ worksheet and recorded students’ feedback for my lessons. I invited other teachers to observe my teaching and to evaluate my teaching based on QT. I also interviewed other teachers for them to make further comment and suggestions on my implementation of QT. Then, I evaluated my performance on each QT element based on such “non-self” evidence collected from students and other teachers rather than just my own subjective perception. I adapted my practice based on such data-informed self-evaluation and collected further “non-self” evidence to monitor the impact of adapted practice. In this sense, the self-study was undertaken in an interactive and collaborative manner by substantially integrating non-self perspectives into my self-evaluation. Such process will be further elaborated in the following section. The collection of data from various sources also satisfied the fourth and fifth elements of self-study. In addition to the triangulation of data, the validity and trustworthiness of my self-study were further enhanced by making the research process transparent through rich and thick description so that solid information are available for the audiences to judge the relevance of the research findings and to make an intelligent adaption to their own context.

### Data Collection: Writing Reflective Journals as a Teacher

Reflective journals or narratives have been widely used in teacher education and teacher research (Akinbode, 2013; Chitpin, 2006; Sá, 2002; Spalding, Wilson, & Mewborn, 2002; Uline, Wilson, & Cordry, 2004). Reflection is also the foundation of self-study (LaBoskey, 2004). Previous evidence shows that teacher reflection is a powerful tool for teachers to construct and refine context-specific knowledge and personal theories of teaching (Akbari, 2007; Korthagen & Kessel, 1999; McDonough, 2006; Rodgers, 2002). Dewey's (1933) *How we think: a re-statement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educational process* and Schon's (1983) *The reflective practitioner* are the roots of reflection. Since these initiative works, reflection has been appreciated in teaching and teacher education as an important tool to produce effective teachers. Traditional professional learning of language teacher was restricted to the learning of *received knowledge*, referring to:

*...vocabulary of the subject and the matching concepts, research findings, theories and skills which are widely accepted as being part of the necessary intellectual content of the profession. So, currently, it might be accepted that a skilled language teacher will be able (among many other things) to speak the target language to a reasonable degree of fluency, to organise pair and group work, to read a simple phonetic transcription, to be familiar with certain grammatical terms and so on. (Wallace, 1991, p. 14)*

Teachers implemented *received knowledge* with no significant influence on it, which led to the gap between theory and practice. Consequently, teachers cannot only rely on theories to understand the increasing complexity of teaching. Researchers ascertained that the gap between theory and practice can be addressed by encouraging teachers to continuously reconstruct their knowledge in practice. The professional knowledge that is reconstructed by teachers in practice and derived from their learning by doing is *experiential knowledge*. Schon named such knowledge as *knowledge-in-action*. Reflecting on experiential knowledge helps teachers to solve problems unique to their individual situation (Convery, 1998).

Despite that reflection has been widely used for teacher learning, Akabari (2007) observed that many forms of reflection were not very effective. Some teachers were actually "describing" their teaching rather than "reflecting" on their teaching. The "describing" type of reflection often lacks a thorough examination of the interaction between theoretical knowledge, teaching context and teacher themselves. Therefore, the "describing" type of reflection has limited value in terms of yielding contextualized knowledge of teaching. In recent teacher education programs, increased effort has been devoted to encouraging student teachers to move beyond "describing" type of reflection. For instance, School of Education at Victoria University has developed a *Praxis Inquiry Protocol* (Cherednichenko & Kruger, 2005) to guide student teachers' reflection on their professional practice. *Praxis Inquiry Protocol* not only requires student teachers to describe their practice, but also requires them to discover professional explanations for their practice, to examine their changing understanding and belief, and to plan action to improve their practice (see *The four dimensions of the PI Protocol* in Guðjónsdóttir, Cacciattolo, Dakich, Davies, Kelly & Dalmau, 2007). In my self-study, my reflection concentrated on the implementation of QT elements in the context of teaching Chinese as a foreign language to non-background speakers in an Australian public school. Such reflection involved understanding QT elements, the teaching context, my own beliefs, as well as planning for improved practice.

At the early stage of my reflection, I self-evaluated my implementation of each QT element in particular lessons and then recorded my self-evaluations in my reflective journal. An array of data sources including students' worksheet, students' feedback, other teachers'

observations, interviews of other teachers, and my field notes were used to support my self-evaluation. Students were asked to do a worksheet and to give oral feedback at the end of each lesson. I recorded students' feedback as well as my other observation of students' performance in my field notes. Other teachers were invited to observe my lessons and complete an observation sheet. In the observation sheet, they evaluated my performance on each QT element and made suggestions on how each element can be improved. I also interviewed the teachers for them to further elaborate on their suggestions. Reflective journal entries which contained my self-evaluation on QT elements were produced based on my consolidation and analysis of such data from different sources. Documented in the reflective journal were also my emotions, feelings, confusions, thinking around a successful or disappointing teaching experience, assumptions and beliefs about the relationship between QT and particular language pedagogy, as well as preliminary ideas for processing the problematic situations in future teaching episodes (Chen, 2013). For each particular lesson, there was one reflective journal entry which went through each element of QT (a reflective journal entry has been provided in Table 1 as an example). As a result, journal entries provided evidence of changes in my reflection, which in turn revealed my transformed practice over time.

March 9 <sup>th</sup> 2011	
Deep knowledge	The key concepts of this lesson should be family members and the sentence pattern for asking and answering 'Who is he/she?'. (Students are expected to ask this question in Chinese as well as introduce their family members while answering this question.) Every week, we actually just have 45 minutes. Such a period of time seems to be too limited for them to review key concepts of previous lesson and acquire the new content. But revision is necessary for these kids who only have 45 minute-lesson once a week. I've spent about half of the lesson today to do revision. In this case, key concepts of previous lesson have been enhanced while key concepts of this lesson are not deeply addressed. That possibly explained why there is no deep understanding demonstrated in Y2 students work samples. Every time, we almost have only about 25 minutes for learning new words or sentences. Such a period of time is too limited for Y2 kids to acquire the content, especially when it is the last school period of a day.
Problematic knowledge	As I explained in last journal, the intrinsic nature of language makes it unlikely to be knowledge that can be open to question. This feeling was shared by the classroom teacher since she write 'difficult to address in learning a language' under this element in the evaluation form.
Higher-order thinking	Most students demonstrate high-order thinking in exercises we done in <i>Zou ba</i> did require students to evaluate information and then give appropriate response.
Metalanguage	Personally, I don't think there was any evidence of metalanguage. This is not evident to outsider observation as well.
Substantive communication	Pair practice is the major form of substantive communication of the content. I have tried to maximize purposeful use of Chinese language in my classroom.
Explicit quality criteria	As before, explicit quality criteria is one of my weaknesses, as indicated by classroom teacher feedback. The classroom teacher suggests asking students to re-state the criteria for ensuring their understanding about my instruction.
Engagement	There is also unsustained engagement today. They are engaged in some parts of the lesson, but may appear indifferent during other parts and a few students are off-task. This may also explain the poor performance on worksheet.
High expectation	Setting the appropriate expectation is challenging for me as a beginning teacher. It requires experience and understanding about kids. Other teachers suggest continuous

	reflecting on what is appropriate and inappropriate.
Social support	I always ask all students to say ‘很好 (very good)’ to praise their classmates. This makes them practise the language as well as appreciate their classmates’ as good learners.
Students’ self-regulation	I stopped several times to regulate their behaviour. Inappropriate behaviour is because they felt bored. When we do pair practice, some of them talk with each other in English rather than practise Chinese. They talk about other things irrelevant to the lesson. They also became unsettled when they felt so excited about the activities or things I showed to them.
Student direction	There was no student direction observed.
Background knowledge	Students’ background knowledge about family is mentioned.
Cultural knowledge	One child policy which influences significantly on Chinese family structure is discussed. Students have also discussed their own family members. These discussions highlight the difference between Australian family and Chinese family.
Knowledge integration	This lesson focuses on the topic of family. It is not based on previous learning.
Inclusivity	Students are all included. Students are allowed to share how they call their parents at home. Some of the words for family members in their own languages sound similar to Chinese.
Connectedness	Talking about family is to some extent related to life outside school. However, as mentioned in previous journals, it is hard for them to apply the words outside school. It is unlikely they will call their family members in Chinese when they go back home.
Narrative	Narrative is used as a minor part of the lesson when we talk about Australian family structure and Chinese family structure.

**Table 1: An example of QT-based reflective journal entry. Note. Reprinted from *How does a beginning Chinese foreign language teacher improve teaching Chinese through a communicative approach via reflection? An action research project* (p.136-137), by Z. Chen, 2013. Copyright 2013 by Zhu Chen. Reprinted with permission.**

### Data Analysis: Identifying Tensions as a Researcher

There were two cycles of data analysis. The first cycle of analysis was the analysis of various data undertaken while writing up each reflective journal entry. As mentioned above, I self-evaluated my implementation of QT elements based on data collected from different sources and documented such data-informed self-evaluation in my reflective journal. In this sense, at the stage of reflective journal writing, data collected from various sources were analysed and organized around QT elements. The secondary analysis was the analysis of my reflective journal. After I generated my reflective journal, I analysed my reflective journal through thematic analysis to identify patterns within the reflective journals. Despite that the reflective journal was both generated and analysed by me, two different ‘selves’ were involved in the two processes: my ‘teacher-self’ generated the reflective journal by self-evaluating my performances on each QT element in particular lessons; my ‘researcher-self’ analysed the reflective journal by looking back at them and rethinking beyond initial ideas recorded in the journal (Chen, 2013). Separating my ‘research-self’ from my ‘teacher-self’ was the essence of my self-study as it enabled me to be literally critical about my ‘teacher-self’ and to discover issues which may not necessarily be noticed by my ‘teacher-self’ during

initial generation of the reflective journal from a researcher's perspective (Chen, 2013).

Thematic analysis is usually applied to qualitative data. Through thematic analysis, qualitative data were categorized and arranged systematically to identify commonalities, relationships and differences across a data set (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Thematic analysis includes six steps: getting familiar with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In going back to the original reflective journal and undertaking thematic analysis, my 'researcher-self' discovered that underlying unsatisfactory implementation of QT elements documented by my 'teacher-self' were often two conflicting items constraining each other. For example, in the journal displayed in Table 1:

- the development of *deep understanding* was constrained by limited class time (*deep understanding vs. time limitation*)
- the realization of *problematic knowledge* was constrained by the unquestionable nature of language knowledge (*problematic knowledge vs. language learning*)
- language learning was constrained by students' unsustained *engagement* (*language learning vs. unsustained engagement*)
- communicative orientation of activities was constrained by *student-directed* language learning which resulted in activities being conducted in a non-communicative way. (*communicative orientation of activities vs. student-directed language learning*)
- the realization of *connectedness* of language learning was constrained by the lack of a target language environment (*connectedness vs. lack of target language environment*)

I used the word *tension* to describe such conflicting items (Chen, 2013).

## Findings and Discussion

### The Benefits of Tensions

Extracting tensions benefited me in several ways. Firstly, it often highlighted contextual factors such as duration of the lesson, the nature of the subject, and the outside class environment which prevented me from realizing QT elements. Directing my own attention to these contextual restrictions did not result in my frustration or disenchantment, but instead encouraged my further thinking about these contextual restrictions in relation to questions like "is it really a restriction?" and "can I overcome the restriction with my pedagogy?" For example, the tension *connectedness vs. lack of target language environment* (Chen, 2013) encouraged me to think about how to overcome a contextual restriction for implementing QT, that is, the non-Chinese-speaking environment in the community, with my pedagogy. *Connectedness*, as an element of QT, requires "knowledge learned is directly applied to real-life problems or within real-life contexts" (NSW DEC, 2006, pp. 1-3). The *connectedness* of language to real life mainly lies in its function as a shared symbol system which is brought alive by the language environment. Without the target language environment, there is hardly any communicative need in the target language. With no communicative need in the target language, the communicative function of the symbol system is not put into full play. Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) takes place in a non-Chinese-speaking environment. As a consequence, learners have almost no need to communicate in Chinese outside school, which leads to the lack of *connectedness* of Chinese language learning to students' life outside school. In this sense, I, as a teacher, was restricted by the language environment outside the classroom to achieve *connectedness* of my lesson. After identifying such restriction, I asked myself "can I overcome this contextual restriction with my pedagogy?" and I realized that even though I had no control over the language environment outside the classroom, I could assist with *connectedness* by giving full play to Chinese as a



communication tool in my classroom. With greater intention to create a target language environment in the classroom, I increased purposeful and incidental use of Chinese for classroom instruction and trained students to respond to instructions in Chinese such as “keep quiet”, “hands up”, “stand up”, “look at the board”, and “listen carefully”.

Secondly, extracting tensions encouraged me to review the subject-specific usefulness of QT elements. For instance, the tension *problematic knowledge vs. language learning* directed my attention to the usefulness of *problematic knowledge* for language learning. *Problematic knowledge* is an element of QT which requires teachers to treat knowledge as open to question. Originally, I felt that this is unrealistic in language learning because language is a pre-determined system for expression meanings and for the purpose of communication the literal meaning of language is unquestionable. This view was shared by the teacher observing my lesson who commented in her observation sheet that “this (problematic knowledge) is difficult to address in learning a language” Hence, I considered a tension between *problematic knowledge* and language learning and raised doubt about the usefulness of *problematic knowledge* in language education. Nevertheless, when I engaged in further thinking around this tension and finally shifted my concern from language learning in general to specific features of Chinese language learning, the usefulness of *problematic knowledge* was surprisingly discovered in teaching Chinese written characters. Unlike other languages which use letters for writing and reading, Chinese language uses characters which are ideographs as the written forms of Chinese. As many Chinese written characters originated from real-world objects, students’ learning of these characters can be enhanced by tracing the pictographic origins of Chinese written characters. Furthermore, I found that for a better memory of characters, learners do not have to follow the pictographic origins of characters. Encouraging learners to make analogy of characters to authentic things based on learners’ own imagination and perception seems to be a more effective approach. Such approach is consistent with the spirit of *problematic knowledge* since the analogy of characters is made open to question and character memorization becomes a process of personal knowledge construction.

Thirdly, extracting tensions also enabled me to be more conscious about the consequence of my practice. This is consistent with Loughran’s (2005, p. 11) argument that “the use of tensions as a frame for articulation and analysis offers one way of making the tacit explicit”. For instance, the consequence of student-directed learning on the communicative orientations of teaching was highlighted to me by the tension *communicative orientation of activities vs. student-directed language learning* (Chen, 2013). The QT element *student direction* promotes teacher to allow “students exercise direction over the selection of activities related to their learning and the means and manner by which these activities are carried out” (NSW DEC, 2006, p. 2). However, I found that students were inclined to select activities which involved no communicative use of Chinese, such as making Chinese lantern or learning how to use chopsticks. Despite of the high relevance to Chinese culture, such activities have limited value in developing students’ ability in using Chinese language for communication. With increased awareness of such consequence of student-directed learning, I tried to ensure the communicative orientation of activities while empowering students to give them a sense of ownership. This was achieved by maintaining a balance between teacher intervention and student direction. Instead of allowing the lesson to be completely “directed” by students, I chose to “negotiate” the learning process with students through the following questions:

- 1) For a given communicative scenario, what vocabulary and sentences previously learned are useful?
- 2) What other vocabulary and sentences do we need to know?
- 3) Are there any resources available in the community for us to find out?
- 4) If not, how will we find out?
- 5) What activities can we do for practicing this new content?

6) *What can we do to demonstrate our competence to communicate successfully in such a scenario? (Chen, 2013, p. 186-187)*

The significance of tensions for teacher development is supported by previous research. Boler and Zembylas (2003) proposed *pedagogy of discomfort* which encourages teachers to move outside of their comfort zones and to problematize their emotional reactions to identify invisible ways in which they comply with dominant values and assumptions. Extracting tensions helps teachers to move outside of the comfort zones to re-examine their understanding and beliefs to search for more effective practice. As a teacher educator who transitioned from a high school teacher to a teacher educator without formal preparation, Berry (2007) highlighted the importance of describing and reconceptualising practice as tensions in her professional development. Berry (2007) explained in her self-study that tensions, as a language for describing practice and a means of analysing experience, captured internal conflict experienced by teacher educators as they attempted to manage the complexities inherent in their work. According to Berry (2007), reframing practice as tensions to be managed affirms the importance of complexities as an integral part of the knowledge of teaching and learning about teaching. In my case, tensions taught me of the complexities inherent in high-quality teaching by eliciting contextual restrictions on the implementation of QT elements. Having recognized the usefulness of tensions, Berry (2007) encouraged teacher educators to “step out of one’s comfort zone to explore how tensions impact practice” (p. 133) and called for the integration of the ability to identify tensions into teacher educators’ expertise.

**Tension-focused Reflection**

Realizing the value of approaching contextualized understanding of QT via *tensions*, I modified my approach of reflection. I shifted away from simply evaluating my own teaching against individual QT elements towards a tension-focused approach of reflection in which I deliberately focused on the tension between the demands of QT and my teaching scenarios. Using such tension-focused reflection, I extracted tensions in problematic situations first and then engaged in deep thinking around the interaction between the two sides of each tension as well as possible resolutions. Such process was also recounted in my reflective journal. Some excerpts from my reflective journal have been provided in Table 2 as an example:

**Appropriate expectation VS. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)**  
 It was mentioned in earlier reflections that CLT to some extent imposes a high expectations on beginning learners by requiring them to use whole sentences from the very beginning of foreign language learning when they are still struggling with individual sounds or words. Today, I adjusted expectations and only focused on the word for cheering ‘加油’ and some names of countries. One teacher commented that ‘this is one of your best lesson, look at the kids, they love it’. And other teachers think this lesson is fruitful and meaningful. However, another teacher think this is not a communicative lesson since ‘seldom do they have the chance to communicate with each other in Chinese’. The practice focused on cheering for different countries. Conversation and dialogues is absent. Then, the question came to my mind is that is there really a conflict between appropriate expectation and CLT? The answer seems to be ‘no’ based on several reasons. Firstly, a lesson beneficial to communicative competence does not necessarily include two-way conversation. Personally, I think today’s lesson is highly communicative-oriented due to the high practical value of ‘加油’ for students as audience of Olympic games. This is consistent with one principle of CLT, that is, language teaching should be tailored to students’ communicative needs. Also, in term of authenticity, ‘加油’ is better than teaching them some other conversations which involves two-way communication, but are deliberately altered for grammar concern and far from daily language. This follows another principle of CLT: language learning reflects authentic language use. Actually, not all real communication are two-way. There are a lot of scenarios in which people either receive or produce information. Considering these, two-way communication should not be regarded as the only or most essential criteria for determining the quality of lesson in terms of communicative competence development.

**Lack of fluency VS. Deep knowledge**

It seems that planning for QT elements separately does not necessarily lead to a good lesson which addresses deep knowledge. Sometimes even though a lesson realizes all the elements of QT with well-designed tasks, it may still be an unsuccessful teaching practice just because of inappropriate sequencing of tasks which looks illogical from the perspective of students. For example, without knowing about that surname comes prior to given name in Chinese names, students were confused when I directly introduced the Chinese way to address a teacher. In Chinese, we address a particular teacher by adding his/her surname prior to ‘老师’ which is the professional name of teachers. This is different from calling teachers in English which put teachers’ surnames after the titles.

This situation is just like the ‘accuracy VS. fluency’ debate in language teaching, you can't be fluent in that language even if you get all the vocabulary and sentence structure correct. You are 'accurate' when you realize all the elements of QT, but may be still not 'fluent'. Both accuracy and fluency are important for producing high-quality teaching which realizes deep knowledge. As a plan, it must view all these elements holistically which requires the teacher to consider how to implement QT elements in an organized and 'fluent' way.

The view that the teacher’s deliberate planning for fluency was required for producing high-quality teaching was not only grounded in my own teaching experience, but also supported by other evidence. The school has their own colleague lesson observation sheet. The sheet includes QT, but also another part called ‘school's specifics’. In this specifics, it outlines particular focus of observation which may not be specified by QT. In this part, ‘sequential, logical and smooth transitions between concepts and/or activities’ is especially addressed. This to some extent indicates that according to teacher's practical understanding, appropriate sequence of activities is an integral part of good lesson.

**Student-centred communication VS. Limited linguistic competence**

In CLT, student direction reflected in principle of language practice through autonomous communication between learners is an essential feature of CLT which distinguishes it from other approaches. However, autonomous communication that satisfies the criteria of substantive communication—sustained and reciprocal—cannot be conducted successfully when students have not been equipped with sufficient linguistic competence. It was evident in an outsider’s observation of my lesson that the students were actively involved in the task and discussion but due to the fact that they do not have a solid vocabulary and lack of practice, they in fact didn’t get as much practice as expected.

Faced with students’ limited linguistic competence, learning through completely student-centred communication seemed to be unrealistic at an initial stage of language learning. To build up students’ linguistic competence and facilitate student-centred communication to happen later, teacher-centred language input is important when teaching beginners. This is not mean to violate the principle of ‘learn to communicate through communicating’, but to alter the parties involved in communication from student-student to teacher-student by maximising purposeful communication between teacher and students. In other words, the students can learn to communicate mostly through communicating with the teacher instead of only with other students. According to the comprehensible input hypothesis that L2 learning would be more successful when input is slightly beyond their current level of linguistic competence, communicating with the teacher seems to be more beneficial in this case. The reason is that by communicating with classmates at the same level of linguistic competence, it is difficult for students to be exposed to language input that is ‘slightly beyond their current level’. In contrast, the teacher, with knowledge about both the target language and the students’ existing linguistic competence, is more likely to control the language input at a level that is optimal for student learning.

**Table 2: An example of tension-focused reflective journal entry. Note. Adapted from *How does a beginning Chinese foreign language teacher improve teaching Chinese through a communicative approach via reflection? An action research project*, by Z. Chen, 2013. Copyright 2013 by Zhu Chen. Adapted with permission.**

It can be seen from the excerpts above that I experienced some problems in teaching:

- Absence of two-way communication
- Failure to realize deep knowledge
- Lack of student-centred communication

Having observed these failures, I went one step further to extract the tensions behind these problems and explore resolutions accordingly.

Behind the absence of two-way communication, there was a tension between “appropriate expectation” for young beginners and communicative language teaching (CLT). CLT emphasizing “learn to communicate by communicating” (Richards, 2006, p. 6) advocates communication from the very beginning of language learning, which seems not to be an appropriate expectation for beginners as they cannot even articulate individual sounds or words. Hence, using CLT is likely to lead to inappropriate expectation on students whereas setting appropriate expectation will result in the reluctance to follow CLT spirit of using communication at the early stage of learning. Reflecting around such tension, I raised doubt about the real conflict between these two items based on a review of the meaning of “communicative”. I found that what CLT really emphasizes is the development of students’ communicative competence. Such emphasis, however, implies more than learning conversation and dialogues. The benefit of learning content to students’ communicative competence has more to do with the function of language than the linguistic forms. There are situations where language use involves one-way expression of personal feelings and meanings with simple linguistic forms. Mastering the communicative use of such utterances seems to be an appropriate expectation on beginners without violating the spirit of CLT. In this case, extracting the tension provoked my deep insight into CLT which eventually led to the denying of the tension.

In the excerpt from my reflective journal demonstrated in Table 2, failure to realize *deep knowledge* was attributed to a tension between “lack of fluency” and *deep knowledge*. This tension directed my attention to an important element of high-quality teaching which has not been explicitly addressed by QT, that is *fluency of teaching* referring to appropriate sequencing of classroom activities. *Deep knowledge* is an element of QT which means “the knowledge addressed is focused on a small number of key concepts and the relationship between and among concepts” (NSW DEC, 2006, pp. 1-3). I found that achieving *deep knowledge* is not only about designing individual tasks of a lesson according to QT elements, but also concerned with arranging the sequence of tasks to make a lesson fluent with logical and smooth transitions between concepts. Lessons without fluency (a logical and smooth transition between concepts) are unlikely to properly address relationships between and among concepts to demonstrate *deep knowledge*. Such reflection highlighted to me that deliberately planning for fluency of lessons is of great importance for demonstrating *deep knowledge* and high-quality teaching. The identification of fluency as an element of high-quality teaching to some extent criticizes QT as a comprehensive guidance for effective pedagogy.

In the same excerpt of my reflective journal, lack of student-centred communication was conceptualized as a tension between student-centred communication and learners’ limited linguistic competence. With CLT as my teaching approach, I tried to promote student-centred communication in my classroom. However, I found that student-centred communication seems to be often unsuccessful in my classroom where my students were beginners with limited linguistic competence to engage in sustained, autonomous and reciprocal communication with each other. This led to my critical thinking about the validity of the principle of student-centred communication in beginners’ classroom. I asked myself “can I use communication in a way that suits beginners’ needs?” Then, I realized that teacher-student communication seems to be a better alternative in beginner classroom as teachers input can be adjusted to a level that is optimal for students’ linguistic competence development. In this sense, students are still learning by communicating.

At the surface, tension-focused reflection is closely related to binary thinking, referred to as “framing issues in terms of opposites” (Elbow, 1993, p. 51). Poole and Van de Ven (1989) acknowledged binary thinking for building theories. They argued that one approach to theory building is “to look for tensions or oppositions and use them to stimulate the development of

more encompassing theories” (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989, p. 563). In my case, the tension-focused reflection was not really binary thinking, but instead binary framing which used binary as a framework for thinking. Binary framing through tension-focused reflection benefited my professional learning of contextualized pedagogical knowledge by:

- highlighting the consequence of a problematic situation which leads to more thorough consideration of classroom practice.
- offering a useful frame for organizing my thinking about experiences
- capturing my inner ambivalence and bringing it to the surface for thinking through
- encouraging new understandings of issues through examining the interaction of the conflicting items

### **Dealing with Tensions**

For the value of tensions to materialize in teaching, tension-focused reflection also emphasizes deep thinking around how to manage tensions in a way that is useful for teaching. Enlightened by previous literature on binary thinking, I looked to manage identified tensions through five approaches. The five approaches will be explained in the following sections with examples from my self-study.

#### ***Law of Excluded Middle***

The first approach follows *law of excluded middle*, one of the classic laws of thought stating that for any proposition, either that proposition is true, or its negation is true. *Law of excluded middle* was formulated by Aristotle as the *principle of non-contradiction* that where one proposition is the negation of the other, one must be true and the other must be false (“Law of excluded middle”, n.d.). Following this law to resolve tensions implies choosing one side and disregarding the other. In some cases, choosing one side is meaningful. Nevertheless, such choice is never an arbitrary decision, but the rationalization of the relative importance of the two sides for effective teaching. For example, one tension in my experience which was managed following *law of excluded middle* is *lack of fluency in teaching vs. deep knowledge*. As mentioned earlier, I found that *deep knowledge* cannot be achieved if concepts and/or activities are sequenced problematically. In this sense, lack of fluency in teaching is in conflict with *deep knowledge*. As demonstrating *deep knowledge* is an important aspect of effective teaching while the lack of fluency in teaching hinders effective teaching, I accepted *deep knowledge* as privileged and then deliberately planned for fluency in teaching to achieve *deep knowledge*.

#### ***Dialectic Synthesis***

The second approach is dialectic synthesis which comes from Hegel’s idea of *thesis, antithesis and synthesis*. *Thesis* and *antithesis* are two conflicting ideas. *Synthesis* resolves the tension between thesis and antithesis by “trying to preserve the merits and to avoid the limitations of both” (Popper, 1940, p. 404). If the two conflicting sides in each tension is described as thesis and antithesis, resolving the tension by working out a *synthesis* is to establish a third standpoint which mediates the two conflicting sides. For example, I dealt with a tension *interest-oriented activities vs. communication-oriented activities* following this approach. Communication-oriented activities are activities for students to communicate with each other in the target

language. A typical example of this is role-playing. By role-playing, students are immersed in a communicative situation which helps them to understand both contextual and linguistic aspects of a particular utterance. However, I found that students were reluctant to do such communication-oriented activities. Considering this, with limited experience, I tried to use some activities which students were interested in, such as handcraft to engage them in my class. However, such activities have limited value for students to develop communicative capability in the target language. By doing these interest-oriented activities, students were engaged in the class, but not necessarily language learning. Hence, there was a situation where an interest-oriented activity does not contribute to the development of students' communicative competence, while a communicative-oriented activity is not interesting to the students. In a single lesson, students' engagement was not sustained throughout the whole lesson since engagement in interest-oriented activities did not guarantee engagement in communication-oriented activities. Realizing the deep-seated issue lying in the division between communication-oriented activities and interest-oriented activities, I tried to work out activities of synthesis type which were both interest-oriented activities and communication-oriented activities to resolve the tension. Adapting games for language practice is a good example of this. By playing the games, language practice became interesting for students.

### *Deny the Conflict*

The third approach is to deny that there is a conflict between the two sides. Elbow (1993) listed *denying the conflict* as one of the three most common ways to deal with binaries, together with *either/or* thinking (similar to *law of excluded law*) and dialectical *synthesis*. In my experience, the tension *problematic knowledge vs. language learning* was resolved by denying the conflict between problematic knowledge and language learning. As discussed earlier in this article, I found it difficult to realize *problematic knowledge* in language classroom because the literal meaning of language does not intrinsically have any problematic aspect. As a conventional symbol system, the literal meaning of language is shared among people to enable communication among people. Hence, language is always taught as a fixed body of knowledge, rather than something that is open to questioning. Nevertheless, later in my teaching, I found that *problematic knowledge* can be implemented in language classroom by encouraging learners' perception about cultural and language knowledge taught. *Problematic knowledge* is especially significant for developing students' personalized memory of Chinese characters. In this sense, the conflict between *problematic knowledge* and language learning was denied.

### *Golden Mean*

The fourth approach is based on the philosophy of *Golden Mean* which proposes that the desirable state is the middle between two extremes ("Golden Mean", n.d.). A similar Chinese philosophy created by Confucius which also emphasizes avoiding extremes and maintaining a balance is known as *Doctrine of the Mean* ("Doctrine of the Mean", n.d.). Both *Golden Mean* and *Doctrine of the Mean* were originally used for describing the highest virtue in people. Following the philosophy of *Golden Mean* or *Doctrine of the Mean* to deal with binaries implies finding a *mean* between the two sides. Underlying such approach is the notion that the two sides of a tension represent

two extremes on a continuum. The tension of *communicative orientation of activities vs. student-directed language learning* discussed earlier in this article was resolved by aiming for a *mean* on the continuum from teacher direction to student direction through negotiating the learning process.

### *Taoist Yin/Yang*

Elbow (1993, p. 54) proposed another approach to deal with binaries that is to “affirm both sides of a dichotomy as equally true or important, even if they are contradictory”. From my point of view, such approach to deal with tension is well elaborated by Taoist philosophy of *yin/yang*, a unique Chinese form of binary thinking. The *yin/yang* structure suggests the following:

Yin and Yang coexist in everything, and everything embraces Yin and Yang

Yin and Yang give rise to, complement, and reinforce each other.

Yin and Yang exist within each other and interplay with each other to form a dynamic and paradoxical unity. (Fang, 2011, p. 34)

The philosophy of *yin/yang* is different from the other kinds of binary thinking discussed above. Firstly, the two sides of a binary are not considered as mutually exclusive, but interdependent in *yin/yang*. Here are some explanations for the interdependence between *yin* and *yang*:

*When yin reaches its extreme, it becomes yang; when yang reaches its extreme, it becomes yin. The pure yin is hidden in yang, and the pure yang is hidden in yin. (Ji, Nisbett, & Su, 2001, p. 450)*

*When the cold goes, the warmth comes, and when the warmth comes, the cold goes...when the sun has reached its meridian, it declines, and when the moon has become full, it wanes (Fung, 1966, p. 19)*

Secondly, *yin/yang* accepts the coexistence of the two sides of a binary. Unlike the *either/or* thinking underlying the *law of excluded middle*, *yin/yang* adopts *both/and* thinking and conceives everything as “a synthetic unity of *yin* and *yang* in various stages of their functioning” (Cheng, 1987, p. 34). As a person, for example, “we are both *yin* and *yang*, feminine and masculine, long-term and short-term, individualistic and collectivistic... depending on situations, context and time” (Fang, 2003, p. 363). According to the *yin/yang* philosophy, conflict is not something that must be solved, but “a world view, a methodology and a natural way of life” (Fang, 2011, p. 36).

In my case, I dealt with the tension *target culture vs. native culture* (Chen, 2013) following *yin/yang* approach. It was discovered in my self-study that I, as a foreign language teacher coming from the target culture, found it difficult to communicate effectively with students from the native culture. To deal with such tension, I tried to develop my own intercultural communicative competence. With intercultural communicative competence, I was more aware of the similarities and differences between the two cultures, which enabled me to move between the two cultures to communicate with students. In recognition of cultural similarities and differences, such solution perceived the target culture and the native culture as conflicting but compatible. By conducting intercultural exploration, my understanding about the target culture improved and was improved by my understanding about the native culture. In this sense, such solution acknowledged that the target culture and the native culture reinforces each other. By moving between cultures rather than assimilating into one culture, such solution promoted unity and coexistence of two cultures in foreign

language teaching.

While managing identified tensions through the five approaches outlined above, new tensions sometimes emerged subsequent to the implementation of a certain resolution, which triggered my thinking about some unnoticed aspect of the proposed resolution. I do not perceive newly-emerged tensions as indicators for the inefficiency of tension-focused reflection, but instead the evidence for the value of tension-focused reflection in highlighting disadvantages and consequences and promoting thorough consideration of teaching practice.

For example, in response to the previously mentioned tension *appropriate expectation vs. CLT* (CLT imposed a high expectations on beginning learners by requiring them to communicate from the very beginning of foreign language learning when they still have difficulties with individual words) (Chen, 2013), one of the resolutions I employed was to introduce Pinyin which are phonetic symbols to scaffold students' phonological awareness of sounds and oral production. Written forms of Chinese, also known as Chinese characters are "ideographs without individual characters that represent the component sounds of a word" (Gu & Wu, 2005, p. 583). Unlike English words, Chinese characters are not phonetic symbols. Pinyin which consists of the same twenty-six letters as English has been used by the Chinese government since 1958 to denote the pronunciation of Chinese written characters. Nevertheless, in my experience, a new tension was derived from using Pinyin to scaffold students' pronunciation, namely *Pinyin scaffolding pronunciation vs. Pinyin misleads students about pronunciation*. I found that the use of Pinyin did not result in learners' accurate pronunciation, but instead misled English speakers. Because the Pinyin system adopts alphabet letters, English speakers tend to read them as if they were English words. This is in conflict with the purpose of using Pinyin for scaffolding pronunciation. Realizing such negative consequence, I acted intentionally to avoid students' misreading of Pinyin. To enable students to read Pinyin correctly, I associated Pinyin with sounds which students are already familiar with e.g. "q" like "ch" in chips.

## Conclusion and Implications

This article has presented how I applied tension-focused reflection to contextualize a generic pedagogical model QT in Chinese language teaching. Tension-focused reflection originated from my experience of tensions while implementing QT elements in Chinese language teaching. My experience of tensions as a beginning Chinese language teacher coincided with the previous finding (Pillen et al., 2013) that beginning teachers experience tensions in their professional development which cause struggles in an undesirable situation. Previous researchers (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Olsen, 2010) observed that tensions in beginning teachers' professional identity development often stem from the conflict between beginning teachers' personal knowledge, belief, attitudes and experiences and widely accepted professional standards about teaching. Similarly in my own case, I have identified tensions which were derived from the conflict between my personal knowledge and belief and QT elements as the professional standards for teaching in NSW schools.

Having observed beginning teachers' negative emotions such as feeling helpless and insecure associated with tensions, Pillen et al. (2013) ascertained that tensions might have negative consequences for beginning teachers. My own experience, however, was different from what was speculated by Pillen et al. (2013). It can be seen from the examples above that tensions generated positive consequences rather than negative consequences in my professional development in that reflecting on tensions enhanced my contextualization of QT in Chinese language classroom. Tension-focused reflection prompted my deep thinking about the contextual restrictions for achieving QT elements, the subject-specific usefulness of QT



and the consequences of QT elements on subject-specific practice. Addressing tensions with the five approaches listed in this article to some extent improved my capacity to realize QT elements in a meaningful way for teaching a specific subject, Chinese in this case. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that tensions do not necessarily have negative consequences for beginning teachers. Instead, I maintained that it is the way in which tensions are perceived and used that determines whether negative or positive consequences come from tensions.

Tensions at the first place may cause negative emotions, yet there is also much potential to benefit from tensions. Importantly, teacher educators need to nurture teachers' positive attitudes towards tensions and teach them how to use tensions productively for self-learning. Tension-focused reflection is one of such possibilities.

It is essential to clarify here that tensions are highly specific to individual teachers' context shaped by factors such as the nature of the subject, the teacher's experience, the target student group, and the teaching approach. Hence, a particular tension experienced by one teacher may not occur to other teachers. It is possible that from other teachers' point of view, the unsatisfactory implementation of QT discussed in this research is merely my lack of experience. Nevertheless, it is just the process of thinking through tensions that led to my accumulation of contextualized understanding of QT and thus transformed me from inexperienced to experienced. With the examples above, what I intend to emphasize is the thinking process triggered by the tension-focused approach of reflection, rather than the actual tensions occurred to me. I agree with Berry (2007, p. 133) that "the tensions themselves are not necessary per se, but they offer a useful way of conceptualizing and communicating practice". Tensions should only be considered as a means to help with teacher reflection, instead of the end of reflection. By proposing the notion of tension-focused reflection, this research has confirmed the value of teacher reflection for teacher's professional development while enriching teacher reflection approaches available to teachers. I also hold the view that teachers should be encouraged to develop innovative approaches of teacher reflection to satisfy their own needs, rather than being restricted by existing approaches of thinking.

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