Part one

-- Learner's language and culture background

My learner Lucy is from central part of China, Henan province. She is 27 years old, and came to USA in August 2014. She came with her husband; her husband is pursuing his PhD study at Vanderbilt. They will be staying in the US for two year, because her husband's joint PhD program at Mathematics Department of Vanderbilt University lasts two years, after that her husband will finish his PhD program back in China.

I interviewed her last Wednesday to get to know her language and cultural background. I got a lot of relevant information about her, her husband and other family members. Following is some of the information relating to my analysis project; she grew up in the rural area of Henan province with a family of four, her parents, her younger brother and her. Her parents only completed the primary education with no English education. Her younger brother dropped out of school after completing the junior middle school, and took a job without using English ever since. Like Lucy, her brother only learned the basic English grammar and vocabularies in school. As other people in her hometown, Lucy's family members talk to each other in local Chinese dialect. Her parents and other family members are farmers and do not speak Mandarin Chinese. Her younger brother and her learned how to speak Mandarin Chinese and English in School. In some way, she did not get any help from her family and community in learning English.

Lucy began to learn English in junior middle school at the age of 13. Her six years of English education was pretty much the same traditional grammar and translation

teaching approach delivered by different teachers. During the interview, she particularly mentioned that her three English teachers in junior middle school had not received proper teacher training in how to teach English, one of the them are retired veteran and even did not know how to pronounce the English words correctly. The English classes were full of memorization and drilling on vocabulary, grammar and test-taking skills. Her told me that her high school English teachers were all graduates of local teacher colleges. They know how to teach English skills effective, however, the classes were pretty much the same to the English class she took in junior middle school. Since all the students have to prepare for the national college entrance examination, the English class in high school focused a lot on test-taking skills as well. Her only chance listening to the recordings about the textbooks were in the class, since it was not available for students outside class. But she never got the chance to speak in English in meaningful contexts, except reciting texts in her textbooks in front of the teachers as part of quizzes.

Lucy is the only person in her family who went to college and grad school, and got her bachelor and master degree in agriculture-related program. She went Central China Agriculture University in Hubei province, central part of China, and was awarded bachelor degree in four years. Then she was admitted to Chinese Agriculture University to get her master degree in Beijing, the capital city of China, and got her master degree in two years. However, she told me that her English speaking and listening skills haven't been improved substantially during her bachelor and master program study. She took four mandatory English classes during her freshman and sophomore year. Her college English teachers were much better prepared compared with her secondary English teachers. They are all college English teachers by training; they have better English pronunciation and

skills teaching English. In addition, her college English class was not just confined to teaching reading, writing and test-taking skills. Instead, she also chose English speaking and listening classes. However, she said that the speaking and listening classes are also more teacher-centered lectures with limited opportunities for speaking. She did not get substantial help from her college English teachers. Instead she learned how to improve her speaking and listening skills by reading *China Daily* (English Newspaper published by Chinese media group) and listening to the audio clips of *Friends* (a very popular and entertaining American TV Dramas) on her own, but she only persisted for the first semester in her freshman year, and stopped learning English after she passed her College English Test. During her four years undergrad study, she still did not have a lot of resources and support improving her English skills, especially in her speaking and listening skills.

Her motivation to improve English listening and speaking skills in her college was to pass the College English Test on one hand, which matters tremendously to every Chinese college undergrad students, since if they did not pass the College English Test, they won't be awarded the bachelor's degree. But the general College English Test will test students' English skills in reading, writing and listening. Only the students with high scores in general test get the chance to take part in oral test. On the other hand, she began to know that English speaking and listening skills are a huge advantage for landing a good job in the future.

She resumed English learning in senior year to prepare for the Grad School Entrance Examination. Since the English test for Grad school only test reading and writing skills, she only prepared for the reading and writing skills. She did not get the

chance to use English in authentic settings with native-English speakers until she went to Beijing to begin her master program study.

At the beginning of her master program study, she passed her placement English test with a high score, and was exempted from taking any English class for two years study. Though Beijing, the capital city of China, has many resources for learning English. Due to her busy schedule in study and experiments, she barely had time to keep learning English. The only exposure to English for her was reading English research papers, and attended research teams and conferences, where English was used as the medium of communication due to the presence of international faculties and students. Lucy also did not have the free time to hang out with her foreign faculty and lab mates for fun. After her master degree program, she moved to Chongqing municipality and got married. Her husband is her high school classmate, who went to Chongqing University for undergrad study in mathematics, and continued to pursue his PhD study right after getting the bachelor degree at the same university.

It was when her husband was accepted to do two years joint PhD program at Vanderbilt University, both Lucy and her husband decided to improve their English skills, especially listening and speaking skill for better communication in America. In August 2014, Lucy and her husband came to Vanderbilt University. Her husband is holding F-1 Visa (students' visa), while Lucy is holding F-2 Visa (Spouse visa) to stay in the US. Both of them realized how inadequate their English are, and decided to take English class. Lucy's husband did get lots of chance to improve his English skills via study and communications with his professors and colleagues. However, things are a bit tricky for Lucy. According to US immigration law, the people who hold F-2 Visa is not

allowed to work or enroll in degree-seeking class. So Lucy's options are very limited. But she took the initiatives to take a couple of English classes at different locations simultaneously to improve here English communication skills. The class for spouse at Vanderbilt English Language Center (ELC) is one of the classes she is taking right now. She told me that she originally want to get her PhD degree in China, however, she changed her mind after she came here, and wanted to pursue her PhD in America. Because she thought the faculty quality and research environment are much better than China, and she wants to stay here to give her children a better life. Therefore, she will keep learning English harder than before to realize her dream.

I got to know Lucy at ELC class, since I am doing my student teaching here. There are 12 students in her class; all of them are spouses of Vanderbilt students. They are from all over the world with 5 different languages, including Spanish, Farsi, Russian, Arabic and Chinese. Their language abilities varied. This class aims to improve their speaking and listening skills. The instructor required the students to buy a textbook and sometimes will provide them with extra learning materials depend on the topic. The class is once a week, with two hours for each session. The learning environment is very friendly and relaxed. The instructor adopts more student-centered communicative language teaching approach, with lots of interactions and communications. There is no final assessment of the class except the placement test at the very beginning. So students are very relaxed, but they are also very motivated due to various personal reasons. Some of them want to pursue degrees in the States, some of them want to improve their English skills for better career opportunities back in their home countries.

I observed Lucy's performance for the assessment at the beginning of the class; also her English learning in the class. As she told me, she was very determined and motivated to learn. At the first class, she borrowed the textbook from me and made the copy for her. She was very attentive in the teachers' lecture, busy with taking notes, active in the class discussions, collaborative in the group discussions and finished her homework on time. She never missed the class. When I asked her to be my learner for this analysis project. She was very cooperative and kept asking questions about how to improve her English. During the interview and assessment, she was very cooperative and candid. I got a very objective and thorough understanding about her language and cultural background.

Lucy and I are from the same province of China, though I grew up in the capital city of my province, we still share the same dialect and cultural background. This is a huge advantage for my interview and class observation of her. It is also easier to make friends with her due to our similar background. Because I could relate to her much better when she talked about her experiences and difficulties in English learning, besides, we talked to each other in Mandarin Chinese, which facilitates our communications and deepens our mutual understanding. She feels very comfortable talking with me about her language and cultural background. Also she is very cooperative and willing to share her background with me. I think that her trust and motivation help me with collecting her background information.

Part Three

Learner's language stage

I have used the SOLOM (Student Oral Language Observation Matrix) and BVAT (The Bilingual Verbal Abilities Test) to assess my learner Lucy's English verbal ability. Based on her assessment results, I think that she is at the stage of Speech emergence, which means that she has been becoming more comfortable with the language, the spoken English in particular. She is acquiring an increasingly larger listening and speaking vocabulary in the States, and could speak in more complex phrases and sentences, often engage in conversations on a variety of topics that fall within her comfort zone (Brantley, 2007). Besides, due to her years of English learning in China, she also has acquired a fairly large amount of English vocabulary for reading and writing. I am pretty sure that her speaking and listening skills will improve a lot as long as she persist in working on her English.

As I mentioned in the part one of this analysis project, Lucy has been learning English for almost 15 years, starting from the junior middle school. However, all the English classes she took back in China focused more on reading, writing and test-taking skills. She started to work on her English listening skills in preparation for College English Test, and listen to original English soap opera "Friends" to improve her listening skills in China. That could partly explain why her comprehension is good in SOLOM. However, she did not get the opportunities to speak English until she was in college in China, but the speaking classes focused more on the memorization and repetition, what's worse, she did not have English native-speaker teachers and friends before she came to the States. All these factors make Lucy quite limited in her English speaking skills. The

following table shows Lucy's SOLOM results:

SOLOM	Comprehension	Fluency	Vocabulary	Pronunciation	Grammar
Total score	5	5	5	5	5
Lucy's score	4	3.5	3.5	3	3

From my observation of Lucy's SOLOM assessment, her comprehension is very good, which I think is very consistent with her English listening proficiency. Because her listening skill is stronger than speaking skill, and the moderator and her other team members spoke relatively slow, which were easier for her understanding. During the SOLOM assessment; she understood what was going on, and did what she was expected to do. For instance, she understood the moderator's questions very well and her answers were relevant. She also knew how to introduce herself in English and understood her team members' questions and comments very well, especially during the final segment of the assessment, she knew how to negotiate meaning with them, and express herself viewpoint to help the team to reach the decision successfully. Though Lucy did not talk much due to her limited oral English skills, but she did not appear nervous and tongue-tied at all, instead, she knew what and when to chime in the group discussion. I think that this has something to do with her prior education experience, the test taking skills in particular, as well as her oral language growth. Another reason that might explain her better comprehension would be her high Chinese language literacy and content knowledge. As we know that the first language literacy skills and content knowledge could transfer to second language literacy skills and content knowledge (Jimenez, 2007), which has could apply to Lucy as well. As a well-educated Chinese speaker, Lucy's rich content knowledge and intermediate English skills facilitated her understanding of similar

content knowledge in English.

From the interview and SOLOM test, I found that her vocabulary and grammar for spoken English is very limited, as she told me in the interview, I think that lack of opportunity to speak English, and limited exposure to authentic language environment are the major impediments to her low score in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation class. The limited spoken vocabularies, grammatical rules and heavy accent in pronunciation affected Lucy's English fluency. She hesitated and stuttered during the group discussions, sometimes she kept correcting herself and trying to find the right words to express herself, which affect her fluency as well. Her accent influences her pronunciation and made her spoken English difficult to understand. For instance, she couldn't find the right words and sentence patterns to express her idea " to pick up her and give her a ride to the museum", instead she said " waiting for the drive …and went to the museum /mu:zem/", which was very confusing for her peers to understand.

Lucy has received good education and got a bachelor and master degree in good Chinese universities. She passed all the major high-stake English tests with high scores in China. Based on her prior English education experience, I assume that her reading vocabulary and grammar should be good. However, when I administered the English version of BVAT, which means I use the English as the medium of communication as required by the assessment. She has lots of difficulties knowing the vocabularies and understanding the task, and did not do very well in the English BVAT test. I thought that her anxiety may affect her performance, because she got frustrated when she did not understand the English vocabularies or synonyms. Although I told her to relax during the assessment, and the assessment result won't have any consequence on her ELC English

class, she was still very nervous and upset when she did not know the answer. To my surprise when I administered the Chinese BVAT assessment to her, she has no trouble understanding the assessment items except some tricky ones and the tricky instructions, but she understood right after I explained to her in Chinese. The following four tables showed her test results. Table one to four demonstrate how Lucy did in the four components of BVAT assessment, there are Picture Vocabulary, Synonym test, Antonym test and Verbal Analogies.

Table-1 Picture Vocabulary

BVAT – Picture Vocabulary	Total item	Correct item
BVAT- Picture Vocabulary (English)	58	20
BVAT- Picture Vocabulary (Chinese)	58	45

Table -2 Synonym Test

BVAT – Synonym	Total item	Correct item
Synonym Test (English)	20	6
Synonym Test (Chinese)	20	18

Table-3 Antonym Test

BVAT – Antonym	Total item	Correct item
Antonym Test (English)	24	12
Antonym Test (Chinese)	24	23

Table-4 Verbal Analogies

BVAT – Verbal Analogies	Total item	Correct item
Verbal Analogies (English)	35	13
Verbal Analogies (Chinese)	35	30

According to the assessment result, her performances in the four segments of BVAT (English) are very low, and Lucy's ceiling level of verbal ability is equivalent to the 6th or 7th grade of English native-speaker. Is that her real English language proficiency? No, I administered the Chinese version of BVAT, and found that her ceiling is through the top, which means that Lucy's content knowledge of these words are very high, is equivalent to the college graduate level of Native English speakers. However, she did not know the words, nor could she make the connections.

What are the factors that cause the tremendous discrepancies of Lucy's Chinese and English verbal abilities, as I mentioned before, the major reason would be lack of exposure to authentic and meaningful contexts, and lack of opportunities to speak in English. Lucy started to learn English reading and writing at fairly late age, and learned to speak English in her 20s, which has already passed the critical period of language acquisition. It will take her long time to acquire the native-speaker fluency. But she may never get rid of her Chinese accent, which I think it does not matter, as long as she could communicate successfully with English speakers. But Lucy's speaking skills will improve a lot in the States if she keeps working hard on that, so does her listening skills. Since she has already had a very solid foundation in English reading and writing, with more exposure to authentic English environment, I believe that her language skills will improve rapidly.

The reliability and validity of the two assessments

Lucy's SOLOM assessment result is consistent with her BVAT results in terms of vocabulary and grammar section. Since both assessment results show that Lucy is rather weak in speaking skills, in particular, the application of appropriate vocabulary and grammar in speaking. After my observation and communication with Lucy in English. I found that she is indeed weak in spoken English. I drew the conclusion from my observation as well as the assessment results for sure. Since I found that the test reliability of SOLOM and BVAT test are very high. Both test seems very consistent and reliable based on the prior research and application (Munoz-Sandoval, Cummins, Alvarado & Ruef, 1984). In particular, the inter-rater reliability of SOLOM is high as well, because there were one moderator and another four raters assessing Lucy's verbal ability simultaneously. Their assessment results seemed very consistent with each other, and jibed with Lucy's BVAT results as well.

Speaking of the validity of these two assessments, they differ in certain aspects. What is test validity? To quote Hughes's (1989) concise definition of test validity, a test is said to be valid if it measures accurately what it is intended to measure. That is, the validity of a test is the extent to which it measures what it is supposed to measure and nothing else. I think that the validity of SOLOM is much higher than BVAT in terms of face validity and content validity. Face validity can be defined as "the extent to which the test appeals to test takers and test users" (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). In other words, face validity embodies the value of a test in the eyes of the test's eventual users. While content validity relates to content relevance and content coverage. The former refers to the extent to which a test's content is relevant to "the content of a particular behavioral domain of

interest". The latter concerns "the representativeness with which item or task content covers that domain" (Messick, 1989). Content validity is not concerned with test performance, response processes, etc. It is based on expert or professional judgment about how the test has sampled and covered the specified domain of ability or behavior. The SOLOM aims to assess students' oral ability, its test format and items are group introduction and group decision-making activities, which involve lots of oral interactions and group discussions. Therefore, the SOLOM assess what it is supposed to test. It should have high face validity and content validity. However, the BVAT claims to assess students' verbal abilities, its test items are mainly assessing students' vocabulary knowledge and reasoning ability, it has lower face validity for sure. However, according to BVAT comprehensive manual (1984), it claims that its content validity is high basing on empirical research and comparison with other assessments in terms of content validity. But for my assessment of Lucy's verbal ability, I found that it was inadequate.

Then how about its construct validity? In Bachman's words (1990), "construct validity concerns the extent to which performance on a test is consistent with predictions that we make on the basis of a theory of abilities, or constructs." In other words, construct validity relates to the relationship between what is hypothesized (attribute/trait) and what is actually observed (test performance). I found that the construct of SOLOM is high, since it assesses students' oral language ability directly based on the criterion in the assessment rubrics. As for the construct validity of BVAT, I do believe that there are some correlations between the vocabulary knowledge and students oral language ability, as the BVAT manual mentions, " there are high correlations between BVAT and other standardized test, especially with the adult learners". But I found that the verbal analogies

of BVAT were testing students' reasoning and logical thinking, for instance, Lucy has to find the right match based on the logic thinking instead of assessing verbal ability. I am not sure whether BVAT will predict students' oral language abilities either. Even though the test manual claims that it does.

In my future language assessment, I prefer the assessment that will test the learners' language ability directly, meanwhile, choose the well-tested standardized assessment that have high reliability and validity. If given the choice to assess students' verbal ability, I would choose the SOLOM over BVAT.

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