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# Interactional Features of Chinese EFL Learners' Discourse in Dyadic Conversation

中国学生英语会话互动特点研究

——中国与澳大利亚大学生英语会话对比分析

LIU Liandi

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## Foreword by Richard F. Young

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This volume is a unique contribution to applied linguistics in that it reports new research on cultural differences in conversational style and clearly shows the important implications of those differences for teaching English in China and for the assessment of language proficiency. Many people believe that language learning involves learning pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, and that is a difficult task in itself. However, using language for communication requires speakers to somehow craft sounds, words, and grammar into a meaningful whole—and this is where style comes in. Much writing in linguistics and sociology over the past 50 years has stressed how important style is in spoken interaction if our listeners are to understand not just what we say but what we mean. As native speakers of a language, we do not generally need to pay much attention to conversational style, unless we want to use language in the public forums of media or politics, because we assume that our hearers share the same cultural understanding of style as we do. But this is the 21st century and the world is getting smaller by the day. No matter where we are or where we travel, we find ourselves in constant contact with people who do not share our language, our culture, or our conversational style. One consequence of this is that we often find it difficult to get our intended message across to our listeners, we misunderstand what they are saying, and they get quite the wrong impression of us.

At the root of these difficulties are differences in language, culture, and conversational style. In China, as in many places where English is a foreign language, curricula and teachers focus almost exclusively on teaching the sounds, the words, and the grammar of English. And why not? After all, it is these elements that are assessed in most standardized tests of English. The limitations of that approach, however, come to the fore in tests of spoken English in which learners of English are assessed by their performance in conversations with native speakers. It is in such contexts of spoken interaction that successful learners need to display not only their mastery of the sounds, words, and grammar of English, but also their interactional competence. In much exciting recent work in applied linguistics, the notion of interactional competence has been theorized as a way that people create meanings in interaction together with an intuition of how those meanings are understood by their listeners. In other words, interactional competence involves understanding the differences in conversational styles that are grounded in different cultures.

This book by Dr. Liandi Liu is the very first published study to describe differences in conversational styles between Chinese learners of English and native speakers (in this case, Australians). Dr. Liu does so by means of a painstaking comparison of conversations in English

between Chinese learners and Australian native speakers. She employs both systematic and careful analyses of the discourse of those conversations using the tools of conversation analysis as well as quantitative comparisons between Chinese-Chinese and Australian-Australian conversations to demonstrate how big and how pervasive the differences are.

Dr. Liu's book is an important contribution to our understanding of conversational style and challenges some outdated concerns about the "inscrutability" of Chinese speakers. At the same time, her work has important practical implications for curriculum designers, for English teachers, and for test makers. For the curriculum, Dr. Liu's book makes a strong case for incorporating interactional competence as a goal for language teaching. For language teachers, the book makes it quite clear that for students to acquire interactional competence, they must be taught the sequential order of talk-in-interaction, patterns of turn construction and transition between speakers, and the response tokens that active listeners provide to keep their conversation going. Finally, though it may not seem so to those of us who have to take exams, language testers are primarily concerned with fairness because, in many contexts, a visa, admission to a university, the opportunity to a better job, and even citizenship may depend on the result of a language test. It is therefore imperative for designers of tests of speaking in English to base their tests on a clear view of conversational interaction and the construct of interactional competence that underlies a candidate's performance on an oral test. It is just a foundation that this book provides.

Richard F. Young  
Professor of English Linguistics  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
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## Foreword by Stephen H Moore

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Speaking is the most common means of human communication, yet the learning of speaking is a very complex process. To be fluent speakers, learners have to be competent across a range of componential areas, including linguistic, discursive, and rhetorical, among others. Needless to say, mastering the skill of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking is a daunting task and this is especially true of Chinese learners of English, who are typically regarded as having rules of speaking and social norms at variance with those of Western native English speakers, as indicated by the fact that many Chinese university students have frequently experienced difficulty in speaking English, though they devote great efforts to learning English.

In addition, in an era when English has become an international language and *lingua franca*, coupled with growing cultural globalisation and increasing communication with the outside world, there is accordingly increasing demand for improved oral English competence among Chinese learners. Therefore, the problem Chinese EFL learners face in improving their spoken English skills calls for urgent attention. China now has the largest number of English learners across the globe and it has its own unique cultural and linguistic learning context. Obviously investigating Chinese learners' spoken English is important not only for its own intrinsic interest, i.e. contributing to a better understanding of speech characteristics of Chinese EFL learners, but also for the insights to the wider world of EFL learners, i.e. adding knowledge to the repertoire of EFL speaking from other sociolinguistic contexts.

To achieve the goal of improving the spoken English of Chinese learners of English, it is imperative for language educators and test researchers to undertake empirical studies to explore the characteristics of their speech and identify the obstacles confronting Chinese EFL learners. Yet as Dr. Liu points out in this book, there are very limited studies examining the spoken discourse of Chinese EFL learners, in particular the dyadic interaction under the examination context. This book, which grew out of Liandi Liu's PhD dissertation, reports on a study examining the interactional features of Chinese EFL learners' spoken discourse as manifested on a paired speaking test task, and is therefore significant and timely in attempting to address the problem. This book presents a conversation analysis of Chinese EFL learners' spoken interaction in dyadic communicative task — a topic which is of vital importance in such areas as L2 speaking, teaching, and testing as well as applied linguistics. The book makes a range of important theoretical, methodological and pedagogical contributions.

First, this study has theoretical significance in several ways. Through the careful examination

of how the Chinese students are managing their discourse in the dyadic conversation, it makes a very useful contribution to the field of researching EFL spoken interaction both within China and beyond. Additionally, this study contributes remarkably to L2 oral assessment theoretically in terms of the construct of interactional competence (IC) and rating scale construction. By providing a conversation analysis (CA) study of the Chinese learners' speech in the paired speaking test task, the study offers a clearer definition of the IC construct, operationalises the IC concept, and further develops interactional competence theory (Kramsch, 1986; Hall, 1993, 1995, 1999; He & Young, 1998; Young, 1999, 2000, 2010). With a more sophisticated understanding of the construct underlying the candidate-candidate collaborative task in the Public English Test System-Level 5-Spoken English Test, this book provides test developers insights into the issue of empirically-derived, data-driven development of rating scales for the paired oral tests. Specifically, the conversational features identified from the research can be applied as a frame of reference for revising or validating performance descriptors in paired test tasks from the perspective of IC. Another important theoretical contribution this study has made is the development of the three-tier hierarchical framework for the investigation of the dyadic conversation under the examination context, which could also be applied to investigate the fundamental conversation management skills which the speakers bring with them to talk-in-interaction in other institutional settings.

Next, from the methodological perspective, the study is unique in three ways. Firstly, using conversational techniques as its principal approach in data analysis, the study lends strong support to CA being a valuable tool for investigating the nature of test discourse to inform the assessment of speaking ability. Secondly, the study further strengthens the interdisciplinary link forged between oral assessment and CA methodology in previous studies by a number of scholars (e.g. Brown, 2003; Davis, 2009; Dings, 2007; Galaczi, 2004; Lazaraton, 2002; Lazaraton & Davies, 2008; Lu, 2006, 2008; Nakatsuhara, 2004, 2009). Finally, by combining the thicker descriptions and quantification of some salient discourse features, this study, apart from producing a more objective and comprehensive conclusion, has confirmed the strength of using a quantitative approach as a supplementary tool to CA techniques for the examination of paired test talk.

Then, this study has important pedagogical significance. It examines the speech traits of Chinese EFL learners in a dyadic interaction against those of their Australian counterparts. The careful comparison of the spoken performance in the same task not only identify the similarities and differences of the two groups, it also sheds light on the effective conversational strategies employed by the Australian students and the problems faced by the Chinese learners in making conversation. The findings could inform the teachers of Chinese EFL learners to improve their

students' spoken English. Dr. Liu suggests that L2 teachers should offer explicit instruction of conversational management skills in teaching spoken English, such as active participation, mutual involvement, and supportive feedback, which will contribute to the learners' improved conversational English.

Finally, by comparing the conversational styles exhibited by Chinese EFL learners and Australian native English speakers in a paired task, the book provides us with an unusual opportunity to clarify our understanding of two varieties of world Englishes, particularly, the speech characteristics of China English (Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002; Wang, 1991; Xie, 1995).

To sum up, this book makes a distinct and original contribution to knowledge in the field of applied linguistics, and it establishes Dr. Liandi Liu as a fine scholar and an exciting new voice in the field of language testing and assessment as well as in spoken discourse studies. The book will be of great value to scholars, teachers and advanced students in EFL speaking, L2 teaching and learning, and applied linguistics. The findings of this book should also be of interest to those who have a professional interest in language study and cross-cultural communication.

Stephen H Moore, PhD  
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Finally, I would like to express my deepest love and thanks to my parents in supporting me to pursue my degree, my husband for his strong encouragement and constant support, and most of all, to my son, who not only makes this endeavour more meaningful, but also my life more colourful.

# Abstract

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This book is a conversation analysis of the interactional features of Chinese EFL learners' spoken discourse. Against the backdrop of the concept of interactional competence, using the conversation analysis (CA) techniques, this book investigates the salient characteristics of Chinese EFL learners' discourse in a paired speaking test by comparing their performance against that of the Australian students, aiming to discern the similarities and differences between the two L1 groups and the contributing factors to these characteristic features.

This book consists of eight chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the principal aspects of the study, including the background, objectives and significance of the study and the research questions as well as the scope of the research.

Chapter 2 offers a comprehensive literature review relevant to the current study. The review is composed of two dimensions: theoretical underpinnings and previous research. The former explores the theoretical background underlying the study, involving interactional competence, interactional sociolinguistics, cross-cultural communication and conversation analysis. The latter provides an overview of previous discourse-based empirical studies examining the nature of spoken interaction both in speaking tests and L2 learning in classroom contexts, focusing on the research investigating Chinese EFL learners' performance on paired speaking tests that use discourse analytic techniques. The review of the relevant literature demonstrates the limitations of previous studies and argues for the significance of the research on spoken interaction of Chinese EFL learners, the test discourse in particular.

Chapter 3 describes the research design and methodology followed in the study. It illustrates the rationale of instrument design, the procedures in data collection, and the major stages involved in data analysis. Specifically, data collection involves both Chinese and Australian students at tertiary level and data analysis is conducted both qualitatively and quantitatively from three dimensions: generic structure, interactional pattern and turn-taking strategies.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of findings obtained from the data analysis using conversational analytic methods in order to contextualise the more detailed illustrations of the findings in the subsequent three chapters 5, 6 and 7.

The next three chapters describe the interactional features of Chinese EFL learners' discourse in a dyadic conversation by comparing them against their Australian peers. Chapter 5 examines the Chinese EFL learners' spoken discourse in the dyadic interaction from the three facets: generic structure, interactional pattern and turn-taking behaviour. Chapter 6 analyses the spoken

performances by Australian native English speakers from the same three aspects. Chapter 7 compares the nature of spoken discourse by Chinese students in the dyadic conversation with that of their Australian counterparts. The comparative analysis demonstrates both clear similarities and striking differences in the interactional behaviour of the two groups in the same paired task. Similarities were found in four areas, i.e. macro-level sequential organisation, topic development moves, strategies for the floor-taking, and means for topic change. However, differences were also identified, including rhetorical style, interactional patterns, turn-taking strategies, employment rate of discourse strategies, and performance frequency of listener responses. The resemblances between the two groups in their interactional features are largely due to the institutionalised, goal-oriented nature of the task, and the differences are thought to result from four major variables, including, but not limited to, their orientation to the diverging patterns of interaction, their employment of culturally-preferred conversational styles, their discrepancies in the conversational management skills, and their differing perceptions of the oral task. The analysis reveals that factors other than differences in language proficiency between the two L1 groups may also have an impact on their conversational behaviour.

Chapter 8 concludes the study. It first summarizes the main findings, followed by an evaluation of the study, including contributions and limitations of the work. Next, the implications of the study are discussed for such areas as research on EFL spoken interaction, interactional competence theory, L2 teaching and testing and World Englishes. Additionally, in accordance with the research findings, a revised version of the band descriptors for the sub-category rating scales in the Public English Test System-Level 5-Spoken English Test, i.e. “discourse management” and “interactive communication” is tentatively put forward for improvement. Following the statement of recommendations for further research, the book ends with a “conclusion”, which sums up the study.

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## List of Abbreviations

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CI	native culture
CA	conversation analysis
CC	communicative competence
CET	College English Test
CLA	communicative language ability
EAP	English for academic purposes
ECCE	Examination for the Certificate of Competency in English
EFL	English as a foreign language
EIL	English as an international language
ELF	English as a lingua franca
NMET	National Matriculation English Test
ESL	English as a second language
FCE	First Certificate in English
GSEEE	Graduate School Entrance English Examination
HCD	high conversational dominance
IC	interactional competence
IRF	initiation-response-feedback
IS	interactional sociolinguistics
L1	first language
L2	second language
LCD	low conversational dominance
NEEA	National Education Examinations Authority
NNS	non-native speakers
NS	native speakers
OPI	oral proficiency interview
PETS	Public English Test System
PETS-SET	Public English Test System-Spoken English Test
PETS-5-SET	Public English Test System-Level 5-Spoken English Test
SLA	second language acquisition
TAC	turn allocation component
TCU	turn-constructional unit
TEM	Test for English Majors
TRP	transitional relevance place
UCLES	University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate

# Transcription Conventions

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[ ]	overlapping talk
=	latching of utterance segments
(.)	pauses shorter than two seconds
(0.0)	length of pauses by tenth of seconds (pauses in seconds, one-tenth of a second accuracy)
-	abrupt cutting off of a sound
:	lengthened vowel sound (extra colons indicate greater lengthening)
<u>Underline</u>	emphasis/stress
CAPITALS	increased volume
% %	softly spoken sounds
< >	decreased speed
> <	increased speed
,	continuing intonation
.	falling intonation
?	rising intonation (not necessarily a question)
(( ))	nonverbal action, e.g. laughter
(X)	inaudible or unintelligible sound (extra Xs indicate more syllables)
→	highlight point of analysis
↑↓	Arrows indicate a marked falling or rising intonational shift. They are placed immediately before the onset of the shift.

Note: Adapted from Atkinson and Heritage (1984) and Wooffitt (2005).

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# 1 Introduction

This chapter offers a brief introduction to the principal aspects of this study. The motivation and background to the research will first be presented. This is followed by a description of the objectives and significance of the research. Finally, the research questions will be presented and the scope of the research will be outlined.

## 1.1 Motivation of the study

As the abstract of this book indicates, the research examines the interactional features of Chinese EFL learners' discourse in a paired speaking test in comparison with those of Australian native English speakers. By using CA techniques, the study explores the interactional competence exhibited by Chinese learners of English in co-constructing dyadic conversation. To have a better understanding of Chinese EFL learners' discourse, the spoken performances by Chinese EFL learners and Australian native English-speaking university students in a paired task in English are compared so as to identify similarities and differences between the two groups in terms of their interactional behaviour and the possible contributing factors to the variations.

The present study is motivated mainly by two factors: my EFL teaching career and the under-researched status of English discourse used by Chinese EFL speakers in examination contexts.

The first factor that has sparked this study is my experience as an examiner of Chinese learners in oral English tests in China. As an EFL instructor in a university in Beijing, I have frequently been involved in several locally designed English language tests, including the CET and the PETS. In the practice of assessing speech production of Chinese learners of English in oral proficiency tests, I noticed that some test takers did very well in examiner-candidate interviews and/or in extended monologues, but, their performance in peer-peer collaborative tasks was not satisfactory, as evidenced by the fact that some of them participated inadequately in the interaction and others focused on their own task without devoting their speaking turns to cooperate with the other member(s) to co-construct the conversation. The lack of cooperation between the co-participant(s) in the task completion not only generates asymmetrical interaction, but also makes it harder for the assessor to award individual scores to the pair or group of test takers, who assume different roles in the conversation and make varying contributions to the talk. As an EFL instructor with a special interest in L2

oral assessment, I have been keen to explore these issues.

Another factor inspiring this research is the lack of research available on test talk by Chinese EFL learners in paired speaking tests ("paired orals"). A careful survey of the relevant literature shows that a substantial body of research has been undertaken on test discourse by EFL learners from other ethnic-linguistic and cultural backgrounds, yet very limited investigation has been conducted on test-takers' interaction by Chinese learners of English. The published studies on test taker discourse by Chinese EFL learners in paired orals are very rare. This insufficiently-researched area merits further exploration.

## **1.2 Background of the study**

As mentioned above, this research uses CA methods to examine the salient features of interactive discourse exhibited by Chinese EFL learners in a paired speaking test. The following section will describe the rationale of the research by way of posing and answering a series of probing questions.

### **1.2.1 Why study the spoken English of Chinese learners?**

The study focuses on the spoken English of Chinese learners for two major reasons: (1) they are the largest group of EFL learners in the world; (2) many of them have problems with speaking English. This situation warrants investigation.

Speaking is the most common means of human communication, yet the learning of speaking is a complex process. To be fluent speakers, learners have to be competent across a range of componential areas, including linguistics, discourse, and rhetoric, among others. Needless to say, mastering the skill of EFL speaking is a daunting undertaking. Apart from developing basic linguistic skills and acquiring useful strategies, EFL speakers have to obtain a good grasp of culture-specific knowledge of the target language, including discourse conventions and conversational styles, so as to function appropriately in the language. During the past three decades or so, with the country's opening up to the outside world, along with globalisation in the modern world, there has been a boom in English language learning and education in China, which now possesses the largest number (approximately 100 million) of EFL learners and users across the globe (Chen, 2011; Cheng, 2008; Crystal, 2008). English courses are offered to Chinese learners at all levels of formal education, including primary schools. English is a mandatory subject in secondary schools and institutions of higher learning. To meet the demands of English learners for the evaluation of their learning outcomes, a variety of English tests have been designed for different purposes at various levels. English



in particular, as one of the three core subjects, along with mathematics and Chinese, is tested for students to enter junior and senior high schools. All high school graduates are required to take part in the College Entrance Examination speaking sub-test, or National Matriculation English Test (NMET), in addition to other subjects, so as to be eligible for admission to university. To obtain a bachelor's degree in Chinese universities, the non-English major students often need to pass the CET after they have learned English as an obligatory course for two years. In a similar vein, the TEM is an important tool for evaluating the English proficiency of English majors in Chinese colleges and universities. English is an examination subject for all students who wish to pursue a postgraduate degree (both at master and doctorate levels). Apart from these tests in academic settings, English skills are tested for all those seeking promotion in governmental, educational, research and other government-supported institutions (He, 2001). For those who wish to pursue further education in English-speaking countries, obtaining benchmark scores in international English tests such as TOEFL and IELTS is a prerequisite. Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that being successful in the various English tests, for many Chinese, is not only an indicator of academic achievement, but more importantly, a key to success in life (Cheng, 2008, p.17).

Consequently, millions of Chinese, young and old, devote much time and painstaking efforts to study English and consequently they generally obtain a good command of skills in reading, writing, and listening, which meet the desired levels of English proficiency required by the curriculum corresponding to their level of study, yet their speaking ability is relatively poor, as demonstrated by the fact that many of them have experienced difficulty in communicating effectively in real-life situations, particularly in having a conversation with native speakers. The issues are complex and the reasons are multi-fold, including their lack of English conversational management strategies, i.e. initiating, sustaining and redirecting conversation successfully, and lack of awareness of specific discourse patterns embedded in the cultural matrix of English speaking countries (Clarke, 1992).

In a postmodern era, as English has become an international language (EIL) and lingua franca (ELF), there is accordingly an increasing demand for improved oral English capabilities in China. Therefore, the problem Chinese EFL learners face in improving their spoken English skills calls for urgent attention because the ignorance of such problems will result in negative consequences, i.e. possible occurrences of misunderstanding in inter-cultural contexts and, more seriously, a potential risk of having limited access to education, employment, promotion, and other life opportunities, for which a satisfactory level of oral English proficiency is increasingly among the basic requirements in China.

To identify the obstacles confronted by Chinese EFL learners in speaking English, particularly in holding a conversation, and to come up with the relevant counter-measures to address them, it is imperative for language educators and test researchers to carry out empirical studies to explore the characteristics of their speech, including their employment of conversational management strategies. The findings of such studies can inform English teachers and learners alike and provide a basis for the improvement of their English speaking skills.

### **1.2.2 Why study the spoken English of Chinese learners in a paired test?**

To investigate Chinese EFL learners' spoken discourse, I have chosen a timed impromptu oral test as my research focus. The "special talk" genre, involving two EFL learners in conversation, is chosen for the study for three reasons.

The first reason for choosing a speaking test as a means to investigating Chinese EFL learners' speech is that their performance in the test can be examined to find out whether there are factors other than language proficiency which might affect their performance. While English language tests have such high stakes in contemporary China, it is widely accepted that most Chinese learners are generally able to obtain remarkably high scores in written examinations; however, their performance in English speaking tests is often unsatisfactory (Wen & Clement, 2003, p. 18). Their inadequate performance in the speaking tests deserves special attention as the scores obtained by the test takers in the tests are closely linked to their academic attainments, career opportunities, and eventually life success as mentioned above. In other words, there exists a need for language testing researchers to investigate and identify whether there are other factors exerting influence on the test discourse, in addition to their insufficient mastery of conversational English, including test constructs, rating criteria, task characteristics, and interlocutor effect, among others. Therefore, an investigation of Chinese EFL learners' spoken English in an examination context is value-adding: apart from getting a better understanding of conversational management strategies employed by Chinese learners, it will also inform test designers of such areas as construct validation, rating scale development, task design, and other parameters involved in speaking tests.

The second reason for choosing a timed impromptu oral test as a site for investigation of Chinese EFL learners' speech is that the two-way peer-peer discussion, which is seen as the most communicative or interactive of all tasks in the existing oral English tests in China, provides authentic-like contexts where natural interaction can take place. With symmetrical power between two participants, test takers in the paired talk enjoy freedom

to initiate topics, raise questions, send backchannels, and display other interactional skills for the task completion, though they also have the obligation to collaborate with their partner to co-produce conversation for successful communication. Obviously by having speakers engage in a paired task, the researcher is able to capture their demonstration of interactional behaviour just as in real-life situations, such as turn-taking, speaker selection, topic change, and so on. Therefore, the paired task, which has the potential to elicit speakers' interactional competence (May, 2009, p. 415), fits the purpose of the research perfectly.

The third reason for choosing a paired speaking test is that language test researchers in China seem to lag behind their international peers in terms of their research on spoken discourse in paired/group orals even though these new testing formats are being used in locally designed English tests, including the CET and the PETS. As conversational strategies such as the ability to initiate, respond, and negotiate meaning in situated performances have become a focus of L2 oral proficiency assessment during the last decade, there has been a growing interest among language test researchers in exploring the nature of test talk elicited by paired/group orals. Although there has been a sizable corpus of research studies analyzing candidates' spoken production by speakers from other linguistic-cultural backgrounds (e.g. Brooks, 2009; Duccase & Brown, 2009; Csepes, 2002; Egyud & Glover, 2001; Galaczi, 2004, 2008; Katona, 1998; Kormos, 1999; Iwashita, 1998; Van Moere, 2006, 2007; Nakatsuhara, 2011; Norton, 2005), published studies on oral test-taker interactive discourse by Chinese EFL learners in the new test model are quite limited. The present study attempts to contribute to this area of the literature.

### **1.2.3 Why study Chinese EFL learner paired speaking in the PETS-5-SET format?**

The speech generated by Chinese learners in the paired task, i.e. part 2 of the PETS-5-SET is the target of the present research due to two major factors: it is the only public English test in China which encompasses the paired task format and, more importantly, it is designed to measure test takers' interactional competence along with linguistic skills, which fits the purpose of the current study.

Jointly developed by the NEEA (China) and the UCLES (UK), and designed to provide assessment and certification of communicative English language skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking at five levels of competence from Level 1 (low) to Level 5 (high), the PETS enjoys an increasing popularity with the Chinese public not

only because it is the largest non-credential (no qualifications are required) language test in China, which is open to all its citizens regardless of age, profession or academic background, but also because, with five competence scales, it can easily be geared to the reporting needs of various test takers (approximately over one million every year) and users. Apart from individuals using it to measure their level of English proficiency, the PETS, level 5 in particular, is now used by some organisations for gate-keeping purposes. Additionally, the PETS uses an assessment configuration involving two examiners (assessor and interlocutor), two candidates and a combination of holistic and analytic scoring methods, which provide more accurate and fairer assessment of the performance of test takers.

Apart from these facets, the most important feature of the test is that it is the only English language test administered in China (including both national and international tests) entailing the paired task in its speaking sub-test in combination with an examiner-candidate interview and extended monologue. The paired task is particularly designed to measure test takers' interactional competence, which is evaluated against their performance by means of a sub-rating criterion labeled as "interactive communication".

### **1.2.4 Why use CA techniques to study Chinese EFL learner speaking in a paired speaking test?**

With its focus on turn-by-turn analysis of spoken interaction, CA is a most viable approach to investigating the interactive features of dyadic conversation by Chinese EFL learners in the paired oral test.

CA has been widely used in the study of talk-in-interaction, including both mundane conversations and institutional talk. As CA methods are especially useful for the analysis of interactional features which are quite complex at the micro-level, they are now being increasingly employed by test researchers in the investigation of the discourse generated by test takers under assessment conditions. The benefits yielded from the application of CA in the examination of test interaction have contributed to such areas as test validation, construct operationalisation, and rating scale development, among others (e.g. Lazaraton, 2002; McNamara et al., 2002; Shohamy, 1994). To improve language test quality, Van Lier (1989) argues that CA must be used to identify and describe performances on tests and to analyse the test as a speech event in order to address the issue of validity. As a response to this call, many excellent research endeavours have contributed to oral assessment during the last two decades based on discourse analytic approaches, which

either follow the framework of CA theory or incorporate the conventions of CA theory with other analytic methods (e.g. Brown, 2003; Davies, 2009; Dings, 2007; Galaczi, 2004, 2008; Johnson & Taylor, 1998; Lazaraton & Davies, 2008; Luk, 2010; Gan, 2008, 2010; Gan et al., 2009; Nakatsuhara, 2004, 2006, 2009, 2011; He & Young, 1998; Young & Milanovic, 1992).

In contributing to this area, a few researchers have devoted their efforts to exploring the paired interaction of Chinese learners of English in the oral assessment context via CA (e.g. Davis, 2009; Li & Li, 2006; Lu, 2008; Pang & Pan, 2005; Wang, 2007). While these discourse-based studies target Chinese EFL learners' spoken output either in international English language speaking tests like the FCE or locally designed English language tests, including the PETS (i.e. Levels 2 & 3), no empirical studies have so far been published on the characteristics of peer-peer test taker interaction by Chinese EFL learners in the paired task of PETS-5-SET, the highest level of the test battery. This study attempts to fill in this void.

### **1.2.5 Why compare the test talk of Chinese EFL learners and Australian students?**

To address the research questions, the interactional features of dyadic conversation by Chinese EFL learners are compared with those of their native English speaking Australian counterparts, aiming to identify similarities and differences in their speech styles between two groups with a supplementary objective of detecting potential areas of discourse/pragmatic transfers by Chinese EFL learners from their native language and home culture.

Given the fact that, English, to Chinese learners, is a foreign language, which differs typologically from their native language, ranging from linguistic phenomena to discourse organisation principles, their use of English will inevitably be affected more or less by Chinese language through the phenomenon known as “negative transfer” in second language acquisition (Odlin, 1989). Apart from the influence of their native language, the discourse produced by Chinese learners might also be strongly influenced by their use of culturally-preferred rhetorical patterns and their adoption of culturally-valued conversational styles as indicated by the literature on cross-cultural communications and contrastive discourse studies (see Chapter 2, Section 2.1.3) that Chinese learners, typically regarded as having rules of speaking and social norms very different from those of Westerners, might use discourse strategies at variance with those of native English speakers in their English conversation. For instance, the Chinese tend to prefer an indirect

rhetorical style whereas native English speakers generally favour a direct pattern in their organisation of discourse, though both patterns may be used by either group (Kirkpatrick, 1991; Scollon & Scollon, 1991, 1995, 2001). In terms of conversational styles, although both styles may be found in the conversations by either group, the Chinese from a typical oriental collectivistic culture tend to employ the “high considerateness” style more frequently, whereas Australians from a Western individualistic culture show more instances of the “high involvement” style (Aritz & Walker, 2010). The variations in the speech behaviour between the two cultural groups imply that culture could be one of the factors which influences the discourse performance of Chinese EFL learners in the dyadic interaction. Therefore the conversations by Chinese EFL learners must be examined from a cross-cultural perspective for a more comprehensive understanding of their interactional behaviour. The comparisons of pair talk between two different L1 groups provide a basis for such investigation.

To sum up, given the fact that China has the world's largest number of EFL learners, users, and test takers and the reality that many of them experience difficulty in speaking English, particularly in having conversations in real-life situations, it is important to examine their spoken interaction in a fine-grained way such as CA facilitates and from a cross-cultural perspective so as to obtain a fuller picture of their conversational styles in dyadic interaction. A paired task is considered the most appropriate way to elicit their speech as it can produce more natural talk than found in other oral testing configurations.

### 1.3 Objectives of the study

The overall objective of this research is to identify interactional features exhibited by Chinese EFL learners in a paired task as compared with those of native English speakers, and the factors contributing to the potential variations between the two groups of speakers in their conversational styles.

In order to achieve this overall objective, I have set out to complete the following three tasks:

- Examine, based on conversation analysis, the salient features of interactive discourse exhibited by Chinese EFL learners' English in a paired speaking test;
- Investigate, by means of comparative analyses, similarities and differences between Chinese learners' English and Australian native speaker' English in dyadic conversation;
- Explore, from cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspectives, factors that have possibly contributed to the variations between the two groups in their interactional behaviour.



## 1.4 Significance of the study

By examining the interactional features of test discourse by Chinese EFL learners in a paired task, the research has important implications for a range of areas.

Firstly, this study has theoretical significance in that it not only contributes to a better understanding of speech features of Chinese EFL learners, but this knowledge may also be of benefit to the wider world of EFL studies. Spoken English, particularly the dyadic conversation in the assessment context by Chinese EFL learners, is insufficiently-researched. Obviously the research adds knowledge to that research area, which in turn has implications for the EFL speakers in other sociolinguistic contexts as well.

Second, this study helps contribute to a deeper understanding of the paired interaction generated during two-way collaborative tasks in tests such as the FCE and PETS and the construct of interactional competence underlying the candidate-candidate paired format in these tests. Informed with the knowledge on dyadic conversation and the construct of interactional competence underpinning the paired task, examiners or raters might offer more accurate and fairer assessment of candidates' output in these tests.

Third, this study provides test developers with an insight into the development of rating scales for paired oral tests. Specifically, the conversational features identified from the research can be applied as a frame of reference for revising or validating the existing performance descriptors in paired test tasks, which might currently appear vague or not explicit enough as they are inadequately specified in terms of interactional competence. For instance, the performance descriptors used for the "interactive communication" scoring rubric in the PETS-5-SET can be revised for potential improvement on the basis of the findings in this study. As such, the research also contributes to the scholarly concern of some researchers (e.g. Fulcher, 1996, 2003; O'Sullivan, 2002; Weir, 2005) for the construction of valid rating scales, which are empirically-derived and data-driven.

Fourth, this study has important methodological significance in two ways. First, through a fine-grained utterance-by-utterance analysis of what the speakers are actually doing in a dyadic conversation, the study attests to the value of using CA methods in investigating test discourse. Second, by combining CA techniques with a quantitative approach in the data analysis, the study not only lends support to the use of quantifications and coding in CA analysis, but it also helps contribute to a more objective and comprehensive conclusion.

Fifth, this study holds considerable pedagogical significance. It sheds light on problems and difficulties confronted by Chinese EFL learners in speaking English and in

understanding effective conversational strategies employed by the Australian students, which is of value in improving their conversational English.

Finally, the findings from this study can contribute significantly to the current debate concerning the norms to be applied in English learning and assessment in the postmodern era, which has resulted in three scholarly camps with different views: (1) the “native norms—standard English” perspective (Davies, 2003); (2) the “new English norm—the World Englishes” perspective (Lowenberg, 2002); and (3) the “both-norms-and-more-varieties” perspective (Canagarajah, 2006). By comparing the conversational styles exhibited by Chinese EFL learners and Australian native English speakers in a paired task, the present study offers a chance to clarify our understanding of two varieties of Englishes. Especially helpful will it be to have a clearer picture of speech characteristics of China English (Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002; Xie, 1995), one variety of World Englishes which falls into the expanding category in Kachru's three concentric-circle model (1985, 1986, 1992).

## 1.5 Research questions

Four basic issues guiding this study are set out below as four distinct research questions.

**RQ1:** What are the interactional features of Chinese EFL learners' discourse in a paired speaking test?

**RQ2:** What are the interactional features of Australian native English speakers in a dyadic conversation?

**RQ3:** In what specific ways does Chinese EFL learners' spoken English differ from that of Australian speakers in the paired discussion?

**RQ4:** What factors contribute to the variations between Chinese learners of English and their Australian counterparts in the dyadic interaction?

The theoretical framework of instrument design in terms of these research questions, along with the procedures for data collection by each instrument, and major stages involved in data analysis will be described in Chapter 3.

## 1.6 Layout of the book

This book consists of eight chapters in terms of the global structure and the content of each chapter is as follows:

**Chapter 1** introduces the principal aspects of this study. Specifically, the background



of the research has been provided in terms of motivations and reasons for conducting the research. In addition, the objectives and significance of the study have been outlined. The research questions and scope of the research have also been presented.

**Chapter 2** presents a comprehensive review of literature relevant to the current study, covering the theoretical background underlying this study. This involves exploring four key dimensions, namely interactional competence, interactional sociolinguistics, cross-cultural communication, and conversation analysis. The review also provides an overview of previous discourse-based empirical studies which examine the nature of spoken interaction both in speaking tests and L2 learning in classroom contexts with a focus on the research investigating Chinese EFL learners' performance on paired speaking tests using discourse analytic techniques.

**Chapter 3** describes the research design and methodology followed in the study. It illustrates the rationale of instrument design, the procedures for data collection, and the major stages involved in data analysis.

**Chapter 4** provides an overview of CA findings obtained from the pair talk analysis in this study in order to contextualise the more detailed illustration of the findings in the subsequent three chapters 5, 6 and 7.

**Chapter 5** analyses the pair talk by Chinese student participants in terms of three dimensions: generic structure; interactional patterns; and turn-taking behaviour.

**Chapter 6** examines the pair talk by Australian native English-speaking student participants from the same three aspects as the Chinese EFL learners set out in Chapter 5.

**Chapter 7** compares the nature of spoken discourse by Chinese participants in the dyadic conversation with that of their Australian native English-speaking counterparts from the three dimensions of generic structure; interactional patterns; and turn-taking behaviour. The differences in the conversation of the two groups in the pair task and the important contributing factors to the variations are also discussed.

**Chapter 8** concludes the study. It comprises four parts: a summary of the main findings; the contributions and limitations of the study; the implications of the study; and suggested areas for future research.

## 1.7 Summary

This introductory chapter has set the scene for the current study. The reasons for conducting the research, the objectives to be achieved, the significance of undertaking the research, and the questions to be addressed have all been presented. The structure of each chapter has also been outlined.