

How Chinese Exchange Students Adapt to Their Academic Course Learning in a US University: A Fresh Look at College English Teaching in China

MA Hong^[a]; LIN Jianqiang^{[b],*}

^[a]Shanghai University of Engineering Science, Shanghai, China.

^[b]Shanghai University of Engineering Science, Shanghai, China.

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Abstract

This paper aims to depict the linguistic challenges that Sino-US exchange students face when they adapt to the demands of English-medium higher education in the US and learning strategies that they came up with to overcome the obstacles in their pursuit of academic learning via in-depth interviews and questionnaire. These findings are complemented by data collected from the real chats, classroom observations, and field notes of over 100 exchange students in a US university. The evidence shows that these students have been tided over the linguistic problems by a combination of learning strategies, strong motivation, diligence, collaborative efforts and resort to reference in Chinese for academic assistance. To probe into the transition period from mainly Chinese-medium courses to those conducted solely in English medium that they have experienced, this article reveals a “thick description” of how thirty exchange Chinese students adapt themselves to English-medium courses by tracking, describing and probing into influences exerted by the exchange program with the aim to reevaluate the current College English curriculum prevailing in most universities or colleges in China.

Key words: Sino-US student exchange program; Total immersion teaching; Adaption to English-medium courses; Learning strategies

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INTRODUCTION

A great majority teachers and students tend to hold the opinion that learning English in an English-speaking nation is one of the best approaches to learning the English language (Amuzie, 2009; Isabelli, 2004; Kuntz, & Belnap, 2001). The past decade witnessed a significant increase in Sino-Foreign college students exchange programs, with the number of undergraduates in Chinese colleges or universities increasing rapidly annually. While being a visiting scholar in a US university, the researchers tracked, observed and probed into the exchange students from four leading Chinese universities, all of whom were juniors or seniors enrolled in an one-year exchange program. Almost all of them ran into the linguistic challenges upon their enrolling in the courses related to their majors, mainly in listening and speaking. After one semester which lasts about four months and more, most of them managed to adjust to not only the English-medium courses, but also achieved academic success in terms of their GPA. This paper starts from a survey to assess their academic background about College English learning and EAP courses these students had taken in their respective university in China, then it proceeds to depict the linguistic challenges they were faced with in their transition period from the Chinese-medium courses to completely English medium instruction in a US university. A qualitative study was conducted to depict the factors that may have an impact from these students' successful transition into the academic requirement in a US university by a close and detailed observation of thirty students over two semesters, with sufficient data collected from field notes and questionnaire, with the aim to take a fresh look at the current College English curriculum in China.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Overseas Learning

Evidence on overseas exchange programs and their impact on the learners from the viewpoint of empirical studies can be found in abundance in literature abroad. Exchange programs contribute to learners' speaking and listening fluency (Seglowitz, 2004; Cadd, N. 2012, Cubillos, J. H., Chieffo, L., & Fan, C. 2008), to learners' improvement in vocabulary and grammar (Isaabli, 2005; Regan, 1995), to enhancement in their reading performance (Bracht et al., 1995), to their learning strategies (Lafford, 2004; Gao, 2006), and their higher levels of motivation and attitude toward English learning (Lennon, 1989; Pellegrino, 1998, Pellegrino Aveni, 2005). On the other hand, linguistic, cognitive and cultural difficulties in programs through the medium of a second language or foreign language have been revealed in the research (Campbell & Li, 2008; Skyrme, 2007; Yeh & Inose, 2003). More findings indicate that the international students encounter challenges that are magnified by their limited competence and confidence in their English (Andrale, 2009).

However, literature on research on the exchange program and its influence upon Chinese college students is unfortunately limited and scarce. Nigel Pearson (2003) conducted a study on 106 Chinese students who were in a 12-week EAP course in a US university. Although these students varied in their time and efforts to learn English and their extracurricular activities and practice of English differed from one another, their English competence benefited considerably from the exchange program. Another empirical study (Richard, & Dan, 1995) reveals that overseas exchange programs contributed to reading proficiency, due to the interaction with native speakers, which could not be recreated by drills and pattern learning in class. With regards to the topic about how Chinese college students adapt to total immersion programs in US universities, literature on this is even more limited.

1.2 Total Immersion Programs

The immersion programs originated from Canada in the 1960s, combining theories in linguistics, psychology and the second language acquisition. A comparative study on it has been done by researchers like Lambert & Tucker (1972), Swain & Lapkin (1982), Genesee (1995), de Courcy (1993), and Baker (1996). Advantages of immersion programs lie in the fact that students are able to acquire the language in an authentic and meaningful context, in which language learning is integrated into disciplinary learning. In the context of L1, English language is acquired rather than learned. Language input, output and interaction are improved to the level of native speakers through meaningful use of the language (Swain, 1995). When students obtain their disciplinary knowledge in English, use English to convey their ideas, and communicate with their US counterparts, the negotiation

of meaning contributes to their English acquisition and internalization.

Currently, research literature on second language immersion programs is mainly in K12 programs. The Sino-US college students exchange program falls into the category of total immersion program, for the Chinese exchange students are enrolled in English-medium courses, in which English is a tool or medium to acquire knowledge related to their respective disciplines. With the expansion of Sino-US exchange programs at the college level and the increasing number of Chinese exchange students in the US universities, it is high time that their transition into English medium courses was to be observed and studied, from which we may be inspired about bettering the College English curriculum.

1.3 Sino-US Exchange Programs

Four Chinese leading universities are collaborating with this US university, sending their qualified juniors and seniors to this exchange program so that they can finish the required courses or the senior project. The basic requirement for the students' English proficiency is TOEFL score of 80 points, ITIES of 6 points or passing CET 6. In addition, they are required to pass the interview in English held by the university.

Students can select three or four courses which come to 12 credits in a semester. To those students who have completed all the required undergraduate courses, they can enroll in no more than two graduate courses in a semester. The courses, teaching materials and projects are all in English, and communication with American professors and classmates is made in English. However, these Chinese students communicate with each other in Chinese whether in class or after class.

2. METHODS

2.1 Participants

The main objective of this study was to track the experiences of Chinese college students from four leading Chinese universities in their adaption to English medium instruction in a US university. The targeted population was limited to the students who just arrived in the US and joined in this exchange program. Thirty students were recruited randomly, who majored in engineering disciplines, such as computer science, mechanical engineering, electric and electrical engineering, and automobile engineering. All of them had no experience of learning overseas. The courses that they had taken in their respective Chinese universities were conducted in Chinese, except for the EAP courses. The first language of all the participants were Chinese and their college English learning settings were quite similar, but their EAP learning situations varied from one to another.

2.2 Instruments for Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through a questionnaire and an in-depth interview, complementing the data from field notes, classroom observations and so on. The questionnaire was designed and conducted by the researchers to gather data on the students' English learning experiences in their respective Chinese universities, the time consumed to adapt to the English medium courses, major linguistic barriers. More data such as field notes, classroom observations, assignments, projects, real chats on Chinese "Facebook" and social activities were obtained to look into the affective factors involved in their adaption. Questions in the interview developed by researchers and some professors who were engaged in the field of higher education were open-ended. The interview lasting over 30 minutes was followed to probe into the potential factors that might have contributed to their successful transition. With the students' consent, their conversation is recorded and transcribed verbatim for further study.

2.3 Data Collection Procedures

The questionnaire was sent out to the participants via their Chinese "Facebook". Before they worked on the questions, they were assured of confidentiality about their answers to the questions in the questionnaire. As for the interview, each participant signed a letter of consent before being interviewed. The interview went on for about twenty minutes. The interviews were made in Chinese by two authors who worked together to get the information. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.4 Data Analysis Procedures

The data obtained from the questionnaire were coded for statistical analysis. The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS, Version 21.0) was used for the analysis, by which descriptive statistics were utilized to obtain the information related to the research. Field notes, classroom observations and interviews were followed to get data about the specific linguistic challenges, the way they tackled the problems, and attitudes toward College English learning. After approximately three months' studying, the notes and interviews were coded and analyzed for several rounds to capture the recurring themes and categories.

2.5 Research Questions

How long did the Chinese exchange students take to adapt to the English medium instruction?

What linguistic challenges did the Chinese students face in their transition period?

What effective learning strategies did the Chinese students adopt to overcome the linguistic challenges in their adaption?

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Quantitative Studies

First of all, collect data about the exchange students' College English learning time, the number of College English textbooks they had covered, their attendance in extracurricular English learning, EAP courses or bilingual courses, and the time they had spent adapting themselves to learning in a US university.

Table 1
Chinese Exchange Students' College English Learning and EAP Learning Background

		Semesters of college english learning	College english textbooks	EAP or bilingual courses	Extracurricular english learning	Months for adaption
N	Valid	30	30	30	30	30
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.2000	3.7000	1.9333	.6000	5.4000
Std. Error of Mean		.17551	.30381	.34552	.09097	.45888
Median		3.5000	4.0000	1.5000	1.0000	6.0000
Mode		4.00	4.00	1.00	1.00	8.00
Std. Deviation		.96132	1.66402	1.89251	.49827	2.51341
Variance		.924	2.769	3.582	.248	6.317
Range		3.00	7.00	9.00	1.00	7.00
Minimum		1.00	1.00	.00	.00	1.00
Maximum		4.00	8.00	9.00	1.00	8.00
Sum		96.00	111.00	58.00	18.00	162.00

These exchange students spent three semesters and a half in learning College English, with the maximum amount of time reaching four semesters and the minimum one semester. The number of College English textbooks ranged from one book to eight books, with the average staying at four books, which covered listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. It is estimated that over 60 % students took part in the extracurricular English courses, mainly for the purpose of preparing themselves for TOEFL exam and GRE exam. However, the time duration was relatively short and the courses were intensive. As for the enrollment in EAP courses or bilingual courses, only one student took nine bilingual courses, the average number of bilingual or EAP courses stayed at about three courses and more. The item in the questionnaire concerned the time that the students needed to adjust to the English medium courses in this US university, the gap was huge, for the average time required for adjustment reached six months, more than one academic semester, and even some students found it tough after eight months in the program. Of course, a couple of students took about over a month to adjust to the courses there.

Table 2
Linguistic Challenges That Chinese Exchange Students Faced in Their Transition Period

Linguistic skills	Most difficult	Rather difficult	Slightly difficult	Least difficult
Listening	15/30	11/30	3/30	1/30
Speaking	14/30	10/30	5/30	1/30
Writing	1/30	6/30	16/30	7/30
Reading	0/30	3/30	6/30	21/30

How long did the Chinese exchange students take to adapt to the exchange program? What effective learning strategies did they adopt to adapt to learning abroad? The researchers resorted to in-depth study, using qualitative study methods to probe into the experiences they had gone through in the transition period by observing and describing the affective factors involved.

Table 3
Learning Strategies to Overcome the Linguistic Obstacles

Learning strategies to tackle linguistic barriers	Frequency
Having more contact with natives to achieve more communication in English	13
Joining in students' clubs and participating in social activities	8
Spending more time doing listening exercises, doing more exercise in English	6
Memorizing new words to enlarge vocabulary	5
Watching TV Programs or TV series, and listening to the radio	4
Referring to the text books regularly and taking notes in class	3
Making the best use of professors' PPT and recommended papers	3
Sorting out the technical vocabulary on one's own	2
Preparing for TOEFL exam or GRE exam	2

When it came to linguistic challenges in terms of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, 50% of 30 participants replied that listening posed the biggest linguistic challenge to them, for they found hard to understand their American professors' lectures and conversations between their American classmates, whose fast speech speed, varied accents and different versions of words or phrases were too much for them to adjust to. Frequent use of idioms in the professors' lectures made the matter even worse. 46.7 % participants found speaking the most challenging task that they were confronted with, as they could not get themselves across in simple, appropriate English. But it is comforting to notice that Chinese exchange students adjusted to academic requirements for reading easily in a relatively shorter time, for 70% ranked it the least difficult among four basic linguistic skills. In a word, the linguistic difficulty that 30 participants confronted is ranked as follows in Table 2 (in terms of fraction):

Qualitative Study

The qualitative study aimed to inquire into what learning strategies these exchange students took to meet the requirements for the English medium courses in the transition period (mainly the first semester). It is an open-ended questionnaire, in which students were encouraged to list the most effective strategies that they resorted to in their overseas study. The Table 3 lists their learning strategies with a relatively higher frequency.

Upon their arrival in the US, the Chinese students found that listening and speaking were two major linguistic barriers they were confronted with. They resorted to different learning strategies, ranging from taking initiatives to making friends with English speaking natives to participating in various social activities to expand their social contact and horizon. Surely, abundant practices of listening and speaking were made in order to make up for the gap. Besides, they laid their hands on repetitive exercises of listening and speaking with the purpose of enlarging their vocabulary to achieve fluency and appropriateness. They also utilized learning resources at hand, like TV programs, news, films and TV serials in English to create more opportunities to learn or practice English. When they were in class, they took notes and refer to the text books constantly so that their excellence in reading skills could be used to make up for their weakness in listening and speaking. In this respect, the students developed relatively strong cognitive skills, social skills and learning autonomy, by which they were enabled to adjust to the new learning environment and to overcome the linguistic obstacles.

When asked about the strategies of learning their technical vocabulary, the students came up with twelve major strategies which they found useful in learning the courses, namely, consulting the technical words or phrases in the dictionary (56%), referring to the textbooks after class on a regular basis (30%), reciting the technical words or phrases (30%), going over the technical words more systematically and frequently (23.3%), taking notes in class (13%), and paying more attention to the technical terms that the professors mentioned repetitively in his lectures (12%).

When thirty-five field notes, together with thirty open letters addressing the all Chinese students in the exchange program were analyzed and then coded, the item of the highest frequency was examination or test. In fact, exams, assignment, projects, teachers, library and TOEFL were recurring topics in their communication after class. While researchers looked into nearly 5,000 conversations on the Chinese Facebook (QQ), their communication was coded and recurring topics emerged, which was listed as in terms of their frequency, such as asking for tips on how to work out the assignment or projects, sharing the answers to the exercises, sharing experiences of course selection, passing information about the senior projects or employment opportunities, and finding company to go to the school libraries. However, what is worth noticing or mentioning is that the students all communicated in Chinese.

In order to probe into how Chinese students adapted themselves to the exchange program on the basis of the recurring codes, the factors can be summarized as follows: For one thing, finishing assignments and projects prompted the students to consult related research literature. The pedagogical wash-back guided the students

in their mastering the key points in the professors' lectures and in their adjustment of learning strategies. For another, with increasing contact with the technical terms and structures of academic articles in their fields, the students acquired these technical terms accumulatively in time. Interaction between teachers and students, students with textbooks or academic papers, the authentic negotiation of meaning contributed to improvement in students' fluency, accuracy and appropriateness in their communicative English.

After seeking students' formal consent, thirty volunteers were willing to take an 30-minute interview, which was at the end of their second semester. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed verbatim for detailed analysis. After reading the records to find out the recurring codes, more factors that might have done with the Chinese successful transition started to emerge.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Authentic Linguistic and Communicative Context, in Which English is a Tool in Their Daily Life and Academic Learning

Constant use of English was indispensable to these exchange students' successful transition, whether in class or out of class. "We will have to use English, otherwise we can't survive here" (C student). In fact, they lived in a truly authentic English learning environment, which is different from the one where they learnt College English in their home country.

I notice that my English performance has improved a lot here. Though I am compelled to use English, I am amazed at the progress I have made in English, especially listening and speaking. A good English learning environment helped me a lot. Back in my university, college English meant attending classes and taking English tests. (B student)

Students were immersed in English, experiencing and figuring out how English was used properly in their daily life and academic life. This enabled them to learn English more naturally, efficiently while they organized, supervised and managed their English language learning. In this way, their communicative skills in English were improved steadily.

4.2 Strong Motivation and Proactive Attitude Toward Learning English

Over 76 percent of the students who were interviewed planned to further their study in the States, some of whom even intended to work in the US after graduation. They had to get a decent TOEFL score or GRE score. As one student put"

I am poor at listening, but when I set my feet here, my attitude towards listening changed from passive one to positive and proactive as all the textbooks, courses, assignment are in English. I am getting accustomed to listening to longer sentences and my resistance against long stretch of listening is loosened. I took the TOEFL for the fourth time, and I got the highest score

in listening, scoring 27 points, ten points more than I did in my first TOEFL exam. Admittedly, I had been preparing for the exam for several months after I arrived in the states, especially doing dictation. I have been working extremely hard on listening to long sentences. I hope that I can get a higher TOEFL score so that I can be admitted by a leading university so that I can get a job and pursue my career in the States. (F student)

When F student found that she was weak in listening, her strong motivation to adapt to the exchange program and pursuit of her career in the States after graduation stimulated her to practice English listening more and harder. Besides, most of the Chinese students found it most difficult to listen to the American professors' lectures and native speaker's conversations, so they made a strategic plan of doing dictation in English regularly. After months' listening practice of high concentration, they improved their listening skills, during which students' meta-cognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring and adjusting strategies were greatly enhanced.

4.3 A Variety of Extracurricular or Social Activities

A variety of extracurricular or social activities enabled Chinese students to improve their English speaking skill and to enhance their understanding of the Americans and their culture. These students took initiatives to join students' clubs or unions to mingle with English speaking natives; as a result, they got a closer contact with life in the States and American culture. As they gathered the first-hand information and face-to-face interaction with their US counterparts, the Chinese students reinforced or changed their cognitive attitude toward English learning.

I joined the club organized by Chris, who arranges for a variety of social activities for the overseas students. I am responsible for making travel plans and promotion, working with American students on a regular basis, so my English skills brushed up considerably. (G student)

4.4 Reliance on Comparatively Good Reading Skills to Make Up for Weakness or Loss in Listening

Quite a few faulty members were not English native speakers, whose English was tinted with varying degrees of accent. Therefore, their lectures posed a challenge to Chinese students who struggled to understand the contents, let alone a longer stretch of listening. After class, the Chinese students had to read intensively to make up for the listening loss in class. With a large amount of reading after class, their reading accuracy and speed picked up steadily, so did their reading fluency (Grabe, 2009). They also made full use of PPTs that their professors left them in the C-Tools, textbooks and assignment to offset the loss caused by their comparatively poor listening comprehension.

I take three courses this semester, in addition to my senior design. Two of courses are taught by Indian professors, the other is taught by a professor from South Korea. In fact, it is pretty hard for me to understand their lectures because of the

professors' accent in English. I have no choice but to refer to PPTs and key points that they mark in class. However, one of the professors who taught us last semester is an American professor whose English was pleasant and easy to understand. (A student)

4.5 An Explorative and Practical Teaching Mode

As instruction was made in English, and the contents were meaningful and comprehensible, in which English language was the means for them to acquire knowledge related to their majors. The teaching mode that the US professors adopted was explorative, instructive and practical so that the students' cognitive ability was enhanced in the interaction with their teachers, classmates and the textbooks. With increasing accumulation of cognitive activities, the students participated in more challenging cognitive interaction, during which they acquired more complicated English communicative skills (Grabe, & Stoller, 1997).

4.6 Cooperative Learning Among the Chinese Exchange Students and Resort to Chinese as a Means of Obtaining Information About Their Courses

In their spare time, the Chinese exchanged their ideas on their own "Facebook" named QQ. It acted as a platform, in which Chinese students helped each other to solve the problems in their course learning. When they ran into difficulty in their learning, they would turn to the reference books in Chinese, and then they proceeded to work out the problems in English. Besides, discussion about the courses between Chinese peers was mainly conducted in Chinese, by which they managed to meet the challenges in the transition period. Strong peer support and resort to their native tongue helped them to offset the stress exerted by English medium instruction in the transition period and built up confidence to tide over the difficulty in their academic learning during their sojourn overseas.

Above all, Chinese exchange students spent about one semester adapting to the English medium instruction successfully as many of them got satisfactory GPA at the end of their first semester in the US in comparison with other overseas students. It may come down to several factors. Chinese students were highly motivated by their strong desire to complete their undergraduate study and move onto their graduate study, a sense of fulfillment in their achievement in their learning, and longing for a better communication with the natives. They adjusted their learning strategies in time to adapt to the challenges in their learning, aided by reference to Chinese course-books or Chinese reference books and collaborative efforts from their Chinese peers. What is more, the Chinese students are top students from the leading universities in China, and the great majority of them got over 500 in CET 6 test. On the basis of Cummins' threshold theory (1994), their relatively higher competence in English enabled them to acquire new words on the side while they learned these technical words accumulatively and repetitively

(Nicholson & Whyte, 1992). In contrast, college English is taught in China, mainly in the form of classroom teaching, assisted by computer learning, which is categorized as weak learning context. However, the English medium course learning in the States offers Chinese students enough opportunities to practice English through course learning, which is taken as a strong learning context. And the strong learning context contributes greatly to internalization of English learning.

The research's findings have a number of implications for College English teaching. For the past decades, English curriculums for high schools and universities have laid much emphasis on reading, thus students are turned out with relatively higher competence in reading. As the Chinese students in this exchange program all major in engineering and their professors provide them with the proposal writing module, it is easier for them to meet the academic writing requirements. However, demand for listening and speaking has been comparatively lower in College English curriculum, and it naturally follows that the Chinese exchange students ran into much more difficulty in listening and speaking. It is no surprise that most of them find it hard to understand their professors' lectures, especially those professors whose spoken English was tinted with accents. What is a worse, idiom, technical jargons, and fast speaking speed of the professors used in class posed challenges to them. When communicating with their American teachers or classmates, Chinese students struggled with the use of right or appropriate words to express themselves. Besides, they felt embarrassed by their lack of fluency and accuracy in their spoken English. That is why most of them spent over one semester to adapt to the English medium instruction. These results do not imply that College English teaching is pointless, the Chinese exchange students evidently appreciated the foundation that college English had laid, they anticipated that College English would teach them more about the presentation skills in English, offer them more opportunities to practice or use English and expose them to a variety of English so that they could be better prepared for truly communication with English speakers and further academic learning abroad.

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