

Perceptions of Academic English Language Barriers and Strategies: Interviews with
Chinese International Students

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Abstract

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Abstract:

As Chinese international students are becoming an important part of American higher education, there is growing need of exploring their learning experiences in the United states. This study mainly discusses their perception of English learning barriers and strategies in American universities, focusing on undergraduate Chinese international students. Research questions include: What themes emerge from interviews with undergraduate Chinese international students? How do they perceive their academic

English learning? In what ways do undergraduate Chinese international students improve their academic English language skills? This is a qualitative study employing personal interviews with thirteen participants. Participants are undergraduate Chinese international students at a large public university in Washington State. Close text analysis was conducted to further study how these participants perceive their academic English learning. Based on this study, undergraduate Chinese international students feel struggled with their academic English, especially in reading and writing. Students have a similar awareness of disciplinary distinctions. Most of them believe that different disciplines have different demands for academic English. They try to improve their academic English by consciously using certain strategies, including self-study as well as social interactions. These students also feel that their learning experiences are significantly influenced by social interactions with native English speakers. Intercultural communications play a great role in their perceptions of academic English learning. The implications of my findings are: (a) undergraduate Chinese international students feel they need more support with their academic English reading and writing. Students from Humanities are in need of extra help with academic writing and students from Science need to improve reading; (b) an inclusive environment should be built to make international students feel belonged, thus they can further improve their self-efficacy. Intercultural communications should be encouraged in or after class so that students can mutually better understand each other. (c) Multilingual teaching is beneficial for second language learners as they can learn English without losing their

own community and identity.

Introduction

Language proficiency has long been a concern for many international students who come to the United States to continue their study in universities. Studies suggest that international students' language proficiency affects their academic performance in the host culture (Barratt & Huba, 1994; Stoyhoff, 1997). In universities, international students often have problems understanding lectures, getting involved in class discussions, and writing academic papers (Huntley, 1993). According to some research, international students' ability to achieve their academic goals is also affected by the nature and frequency of communications and interactions with people from the host culture (Hammer, 1992). Xu's study (1991) suggest that English proficiency is the single most important factor influencing international university students' academic coping ability.

It is a common phenomenon that many international students who do not speak English as their first language struggle a lot with their English learning while simultaneously having to learn disciplinary content through English as well.

In a study of 310 international university students, Wan, Chapman, and Biggs (1992) find English proficiency to be one of the two major factors affecting international students' academic adjustment to American universities. They also argue that academic stress is resulted from students' perceptions of their ability to meet with the role demands. Differences in their cognitive appraisals of academic stress can be

influenced by cultural differences, available social support, and differences in students' perceived role skills. In addition, there is quantitative research on the correlation between language proficiency and procrastination behavior, concluding that language proficiency does have an influence on international students' academic performance (Lowinger, He, Lin & Chang, 2014).

The findings of a survey reveal that most international students' proficiency levels are below the entry level of the university's requirement and the most crucial language skills needed by the students are listening and speaking (Maros, Stapa & Yasin, 2012). In his study, Rahman (2009) suggests that the students need a number of important writing skills such as writing a thesis, project papers, and assignment.

Language proficiency influences academic performance not only in class but also in a larger context. According to some research, international students' abilities to achieve their academic goals are also affected by the nature and frequency of communications and interactions with people from the host culture.

When facing all these difficulties, international students need some extra strategies to help themselves improve their language abilities. The idea of "strategies" has been often discussed in the field of applied linguistics and the concept has been specifically used in second language acquisition.

Oxford (1993) defines second language learning strategies as "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use - often consciously - to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing and using the second language" (p.1),

emphasizing the importance of conscious strategies in language learning. A case study of twelve diaries from students in an English university indicates more successful students use strategies more frequently (Halbach, 2000). Wu (2008) also finds a correlation between cognitive strategy use and English proficiency.

However, some researchers have questioned this link. In a study (Ebsworth, Tang, Razavi & Aiello, 2014) exploring the effects of cultural and linguistic background, second language proficiency, and gender on language learning strategies, it is revealed that Russian students use significantly more strategies than the Chinese students in three categories: memory, cognition, and metacognition. Chinese international students' perception of their language proficiency and strategy can be quite phenomenological because of their cultural background. Since the way that English is taught in China is more through writing than through speaking, many Chinese international students know English grammar and vocabulary but have a difficult time with conversational English (Wan, 1999).

Further, Chinese students often have difficulty answering questions verbally and writing essays (Feng, 1991). Many Chinese students are not well prepared for class discussions when they come to American universities, which results in their lack of class participation. Besides, international students often have problems understanding lectures, taking notes...and writing papers (Huntley, 1993). Students in universities can feel the academic stress because of these difficulties with the usage of English, especially when they take classes in which communication and participation are highly

encouraged (Olaniran, 1996).

Since international students face the difficulty of academic English acquisition, it is meaningful to know what kinds of problems they have and how they try to solve them. After investigation, targeted help can be provided for their English improvement. As a Chinese international student, I feel necessary to learn more about the experiences of undergraduate Chinese international students.

My research questions include: What themes emerge from interviews with undergraduate Chinese international students? How do they perceive their academic English learning? In what ways do undergraduate Chinese international students improve their academic English language skills? The purpose of this study is to figure out the perceptions of academic English language barriers and strategies that are helpful to second language learners, especially undergraduate Chinese international students.

Method

In this study, interviewing is the main qualitative approach. I collected narrative data through semi-structured interviews and observations of participants occurred during the interviews. As is put forward by Stake (1995), “The qualitative researcher emphasizes episodes of nuance, the sequentiality of happenings in context, the wholeness of the individual” (p. xii). In-depth interviewing is an effective approach to exploring individuals’ hidden thoughts. Glesne (2011) talks about qualitative interviews in a vivid way. She argues that interviewing is like the process of getting words to fly, respondents are supposed to “hit” and hit well in every corner of the data

park when a question is tossed.

One-on-one interviewing enabled me to hear individual stories and to more deeply explore the exact feelings of these second language learners. In addition, I got a broader view of connections between first language and their academic English learning through the interviews with different participants, even though contradictions appeared.

Participants

I initiated different approaches to invite participants, for example, online posts, mass emails, and social networks. At first, I posted an invitation on We-chat and Facebook and a few students responded. Next, I consulted the student office in our department and asked them for help to forward my study to all the students in our college. In addition, I contacted an undergraduate Chinese friend. She posted my study online and recommended more undergraduate students as participants. Furthermore, I asked each participant to invite their peers every time after interviewing and I even invited students or friends sitting beside my participant when they showed up together. During the process of recruitment, I only excluded students who were not undergraduate students. Participants always had the privilege to choose the place they felt comfortable with and all interviews turned out to happen in café.

I interviewed thirteen undergraduate Chinese international students from January to March, 2017. Participants were all students from a public university in Washington State, which has been famous for its diversity. According to the report *International Student Quick Stats* (2014) released by the university's International Student Services

Office, 52.6% of its foreign students enrolled that year were from China. Also, in another report, the percentage of undergraduate international students increased more than three hundred times, from approximately 3% to 15% between the year 2003 and 2015, while the total number of undergraduate students only increased about 14%.

Participants came from different schools or departments, ranging from Art to Engineering. Eight of them went to international high schools in China and three spent two years or more in American high schools. Table 1 lists study participants by pseudonyms.

Table 1

Participants by Pseudonyms: Participants, Age, Major, and Year Interviewed

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Major	Years in the United States	Language Interviewed
Amy	19	Education & Psychology	2	Chinese
Dalya*	22	Education & Music	7	English
Cathryn	19	Art	2	English
Diana*	18	Communication	5	English
Elina	18	Psychology & Communication	1	English
Frank	19	Engineering	1	Chinese & English
Ellen	23	Business	4	Chinese
Sarah	24	Linguistic	4	English
Sandy	18	Undeclared	1	English
Maria	21	Economics & Psychology	3	English
Laura	21	Education	4	English

Whitney*	18	Undeclared	3	English
Beth	18	Art & Science	1	English

*these participants spent two years or more in American high schools.

Data Collection and Analysis

I prepared semi-structured interview protocols in advance. Every interview was one-on-one and ranged from forty minutes to an hour in length. In total, I got 15 hours of interview audio. To make my interviews more efficient, I pre-interviewed two university students and discussed with two colleagues about interview questions to revise the interview protocol. Interview questions are listed in the appendix. These questions were a flexible guide, adapted to the circumstances of each interview. Interviews were audio-recorded. To make participants as comfortable as possible, I asked whether they would like to be interviewed in English before started. Most participants willingly accepted using English while two of them proposed using Chinese instead. As requested by those two participants, I talked in Chinese with them when interviewing and later translated their words into English. Another participant mixed English with some Chinese when explaining his ideas. The rest participants felt comfortable talking in English. I recorded and transcribed every interview in English and invited each participant to review his/her transcription. All transcriptions were reviewed and approved by participants.

I transcribed all the interviews for a qualitative analysis based on themes discussed by the participants. The data analysis followed with both deductive and inductive

strategies. In the *Techniques to Identify Themes*, Ryan & Bernard (2003) discuss the importance of themes and how to detect themes through data analysis. Repetitions, metaphors and analogies, transitions, similarities and differences, and missing data are all the fundamental parts that should be scrutinized. This study tries to employ the techniques suggested to generate themes and analyze the data. Through the inductive processes, coding categories emerged in the manner described by Bogdan and Biklen (1998): “You search through your data for regularities and patterns as well as for topics your data cover” (p. 171).

Limitations of this study

There are several factors that can possibly affect the findings of this study. First, the fact that eleven out of thirteen participants were encouraged to speak English in interviews raises a big problem. Participants may not be able to express themselves well in English, which is their second language. Interviews took longer time and might be less informative when participants have limited English language ability. From the observations during all the interviews, participants tended to keep silent when they had negative attitudes towards certain topics. The silence was usually long, partly because they had negative feelings about the topic, partly because they had to organize their language. For the two participants speaking Chinese in interviews, the translations produced can be inaccurate and sometimes subjective. Interpretations play an important role in conveying participants’ ideas. Even though translations have been discussed with and consented by participants, subjective interpretations might not be avoidable.

It is hard to avoid subjectivity in interviews. Some interview questions may seem vague to participants. When participants cannot understand initial interview questions, explanations or paraphrases have to be provided in different ways, bring out the subjectivity of the researcher.

Second, three of the participants spent two years or more in American high school, speaking English more fluently. They stayed in the United States and studied academic content in English for longer time. This experience could possibly influence their perceptions of academic English learning in universities. They might feel less struggled no matter in writing or reading. It was also easier for them to talk about cultural differences and other profound topics since they were already familiar with the environment and could observe on a deeper level.

Third, my position as a researcher and Chinese could influence participants' answers greatly. When talking about their perceptions of academic English learning, they might have felt more relaxed sharing struggles with a Chinese coming from their community. Since I shared some cultural codes with my participants, it was convenient for them to share deeper feelings about cultural differences they experienced in the United States and other thoughts about intercultural communication. If they were interviewed by a native English speaker, they would have expressed more motivation towards native-likeness for English study, out of social and communicational courtesy.

Last, this study only focuses on the perception of undergraduate Chinese international students. However, their perceptions are possibly not congruent with

professor's impressions and their actual language levels. Students' academic records, interviews with professors and observations on students' actual learning experiences can be other data for further triangulation. In spite of these issues, this study is still valuable in terms of getting to know how undergraduate Chinese international students perceive their own academic English and foreseeing how these perceptions influence their self-efficacy in academic learning.

Findings

Theme 1: Challenges and Resources with Academic English. Participants in this study reported having problems mainly with vocabulary, writing and context understanding in their academic learning process. It is not surprising to see participants feel challenged with vocabulary. Unfamiliar words make reading more difficult, as was said by Sandy:

I hate reading, I hate reading, because there's so much reading (striking the table with two hands). There are a lot of sentence structures, vocabularies I don't understand, and they compose into a sentence that doesn't even make sense to me. The most difficult part is vocabulary. (Sandy 2017)

When encountering some unfamiliar words, learners either skip them, guess the meaning or look up the dictionary for an explanation. Jargons and terms are usually the keys to understanding some academic content, just like what Amy told:

...You can choose simple words when you speak but when you read, professors always choose complicated words to make you confused. I feel that they write

in that way intentionally...However, professors won't change their style while I feel this way. Using words that are not so complicated can make me feel more interested in the content itself instead of wasting too much time trying to figure out the vocabulary. (Amy 2017)

Contrary to some common impressions that Chinese international students are better at writing than speaking, most participants worry more about their writing abilities. Some of them try to relieve their concerns with strategies they think are useful. They often take notes, highlight when reading, both consciously or unconsciously. One of the participants, Cathryn, said that she would check her writing several times intentionally after finishing an assignment:

Writing is the hardest, then listening and speaking. So far the writing is ok. But I'm not sure about this art class. It has a lot of writing about arts. For example, the deadline is on Thursday, I will finish it on Monday and I will read every day. And another day I read it, I check it. And another day I read it again and check it. I do it three times at least. But it has to be on different days. because if you read twice a day, it doesn't make any difference. You have to wait until the next day. (Cathryn 2017)

Sarah expressed the same concern even though she had a high evaluation of her language ability:

...but when you have to write a paper, you got to know the paper inside out, that's really hard. Because the way we think, the logic is really different, like in

Chinese writing and in English writing, the terms of order. English writing is spiral, which is different from Chinese writing. That is also something new. You are not going to get it at the first time. I just did whatever I could, and tried my best and still not feel satisfied with it. (Sarah 2017)

Sarah chose to ask American roommate whenever she needed help with academic English writing, taking advantage of social interactions:

I did it mostly on my own, if I find the professor is rigorous on grammar and everything, I will just ask my roommate to read it for me. I'm like, 'Read it, five minutes, tell me something that's really obvious, I'll change it.' And she will give me some advice like, 'I think this sounds weird and we should change that.'

(Sarah 2017)

For academic learning, reading is also an important part. Comprehension relies not only on vocabulary but also on the understanding of the context. It is often about the common knowledge shared by native speakers. Learning becomes a more complicated process to international students when it includes unfamiliar background knowledge. Whitney said she fell in trouble with some quotes by famous people in American history and culture:

The words are difficult. And some cultural things. They will include some famous people and their quotes. I don't know those people. (Whitney 2017)

The structure of English is quite different Chinese, which makes English incomprehensible to some Chinese international students, as spoken by Amy:

I still feel struggled when I have to read something more complicated like academic papers. Sometimes, even I know every word in a sentence, the sentence as a whole still doesn't make sense to me cause I'm unfamiliar with the context. I'm not a girl who lives in U.S since I was young. Some vocabulary or phrases they use are different from what we understand. So even though I know every word in a sentence when I read academic papers, I still don't know what it talks about. (Amy 2017).

Another participant, Dalya, talked about how difficult it was to memorize all the English names of scholars and policies, as well as the “common sense” that are new to international students:

This quarter I was taking a social policy class, one of the requirement classes for senior students in my college, I feel a little bit struggled right now, because, we talk about the government a lot. The teacher felt that's the knowledge every student should know. like the three branches of government...I can't even remember right now. They think that's common sense, but for us, we have to look it up, trying to learn from the beginning. I don't want to say this, but teachers sometimes don't realize the difference. (Dalya 2017)

Participants in this study have a clear awareness of and emphasis on disciplinary English requirements. Most participants claim that different subjects have different requirements of English abilities, especially for reading and writing:

For like Science course it's really straightforward, as long as you understand

the sentence and the vocabulary, you understand everything. But for classes like English and Linguistics, you have to reread all the contents and have your own understanding, that's the hard part. (Sandy 2017)

Maria thought science writing was comparatively easy because of structures provided while other genres could be a lot more difficult:

I don't have to write literature or argument. I write more academic (science) reports. You know academic reports only contain certain parts, like introduction, methods, measurement, and discussion, there is a strict structure of how you can write scientific papers. You to use a simple language and simple grandma so writing is not so difficult for me. I can say it's quite easy. I can get higher grades than American friends. You have a clear structure, like you use headlines, subtitles, if you can follow the instructions, you can get high grades, and that will be a good scientific paper.

If you study sociology or history it might be quite difficult to write papers.

I choose the Economy major partly because it's quite friendly to international students and they don't require a lot of writing skills. (Maria 2017)

Science writing is distinct from social science writing. Most participants in this study agree that the language difficulty varies to students from different fields. It is possible that students from Science mainly have more problems with reading while students from Humanities have problems with both reading and writing.

Using First Language As Resource. How to make use of the first language often

depends on situations and the levels of Language learners. In this study, participants tend to use their first language in a small group or after class discussions, because it is easier and faster to communicate when they use the same SNS (social networking services) app named We-chat. In class, they found it convenient to sit together and discuss quietly in their native language:

Chinese international students tend to sit together in order to discuss in Chinese which is the right answer to choose. Discussions are allowed in class. The teacher often says: talk to your partner and discuss the right answer. Then we will discuss in Chinese. (Amy 2017)

Frank's experience also shows how he asks his Taiwanese friend for help when he has problems. Whenever they study together, his friend always prefers speaking Chinese:

I ask my friend. He's good at this. Like some part, I cannot understand. Wait, I can find the sentence (pointing out the sentence he didn't quite understand from an article he was reading). 'only Bla Bla...' I asked what did this mean, and he was like, 'oh, ok, it means...', he said in Chinese. (Frank 2017)

Chinese international students feel comfortable when talking casually with their peers in Chinese, however, they become more careful with using translations or translated versions of materials to support their academic learning. It is often recognized as acceptable using this strategy when learners have great difficulty with English. As pointed out by Elina, some beginners can use the first language as a tool:

For Economics, I try to learn from Chinese textbooks and it went really well. It really helped me...People like me can first use Chinese language or read Chinese textbooks to understand what's the term or the knowledge is about.

Translated versions of reading materials are acceptable when learners find that the academic content is way too difficult and almost nothing makes sense to them, I only read some Chinese materials related to what I'm learning if I'm in the situation that everything just doesn't make sense to me and I need some solution. (Jane 2017)

Except for those who have great difficulty with English, translated versions of reading materials, including books and articles, are not popular among Chinese international students. Even though they might use Baidu (a Chinese searching engine) to search for some information, they try to study mostly in English.

Another participant, Frank, also expressed his idea of using translated reading materials when studying:

I've heard that some friends have Chinese versions of books and they read that.

I've got some friends from Taiwan, and because the textbooks in college, some of them are English, they have Chinese versions and they read that, I don't think that's the point (of learning). I think we are in college, you have to read English.

Well, if that person is not good at English, go ahead, but not for me.(Frank 2017)

Maria Echoed with this idea saying that:

I never translate academic readings, I don't think it will help me understand, it

just confuses me more. It's like double efforts. You can look up a dictionary with English explanations. (Maria 2017)

Participants are very cautious about their first language use in academic learning. They are concerned that using translations in the first language will make them rely on it and that is not a right way to learn:

Sometimes if you really cannot understand, it might be a good choice to read Chinese, but it's never good to read Chinese article. For me, I won't do it. Once you read Chinese, will you read English again? No, you will not. What's the point of reading the Chinese thing? You are supposed to just read in English. Even if you don't get it, even if you want to sleep, keep reading it. When I first came here and read the text, I could fall asleep. But the whole point is you keep staring at it, you keep reading it. And then you read before class, and in class, the professor will talk about it and you come back again and you read again. That's how you start to learn. It's not like, oh, I don't get it and I need to get it, so I look into Chinese. That's not how you learn. (Diana 2017)

Cathryn told her story about using Chinese translations of reading materials when learning. She even felt guilty after taking advantage of Chinese translated versions:

I did it once or twice...I don't think it's (reading Chinese translated version of materials) a good thing. You are going to rely on translating. I don't feel honest to do that. I feel really bad. I feel I'm cheating or something. I could have just read English, it would just take me more time. I actually have to put more efforts

into it, and I think that's also what professors want. They want me to put more efforts. But I took the short cut. It's not like I don't understand English, it's just some words I don't know. I don't want to spend too much time searching or looking up the dictionary. (Cathryn 2017)

Arbitrary conclusions about the use of the first language should be avoided. It is more reasonable to make use of the first language according to individual needs and learning purposes. Moreover, some learners feel losing their first language while working hard to improve English:

I don't write in Chinese, that's sad. I think that's really a problem if I go back to China to find a job. I may need a little bit time to recover. (Dalya 2017)

Theme 2: Native-likeness Is Not Necessary

As has always been an ideal for many international students, standard, native-like English has great attractiveness. Being able to speak English like native speakers is still a goal for some of them, either consciously or unconsciously. As a freshman, Frank was ambitious to achieve a higher level in English. He expressed his wish in a this way:

I want to be as fluent as native speakers. That's why I come here. I don't have to be as fluent as them, but of course, it's better to be like that. I know it takes time, I just feel like I'm in a rush. It's easier to make friends that way. (Frank 2017)

When talking about the strategies useful for English learning, Elina's ideal was also disclosed, wishing to be good at English as native speakers:

I have some apps that forward news daily so that I can read the news just like native speakers. (Elina 2017)

It is often taken for granted that international students can have better options when looking for jobs if they can speak better English and communicate well. However, participants in this study have the awareness that native-likeness is not requisite. When asked about the necessity of speaking English as native speakers, Sandy gave her response like this:

No, I don't think it's necessary. Actually, I love accents. Accents are representative of one's own culture and one's own pronunciation. For example, in Korea, a lot of Korean people have strong accents, they would have twisted sound in a word. That's the fascinating part. I think that's totally ok as long as people understand you. Things always work out, You don't really have to communicate with people through language. Like your facial expression, your body movement, you can even draw to make people understand you. (Sandy 2017)

Maria also talked about her ideas of accent in communication. She thought that employers in China would not judge their employees by accent as long as they can communicate with foreign customers. She said:

Accent is not so important. I know a lot of native speakers with accents but I can understand them. For grammar, sometimes you make mistakes in daily talk, but American people can still understand you. The only problem is, do you

know how to express your feelings, your opinions? That's the problem. It's not about your accent, grammar or vocabulary. You can express your opinions with the easiest grammar or the easiest vocabulary. Many Chinese don't want accent and they try to practice like a native speaker, but I think you can have accent, accent is not an embarrassing thing. (Maria 2017)

This opinion is also shared by Laura:

You don't have to speak English as good as native speakers as long as they can get what you mean and you can express your main ideas. I think that's enough. You don't have to speak that good English, you just have to make them understand and make them like you. I have some European classmates and their accent is even worse than us but they still feel really confident to express their ideas, to answer questions in class and to make friends with Americans. (Laura 2017)

Whitney thought Chinese was helpful to English learning even in the form of "Chinglish" (Chinese-like English):

If you are speaking Chinglish, it's not bad. Even though you are putting English words in Chinese order, it still makes sense sometimes. That will definitely help when you speak English. (Whitney 2017)

Theme 3: Beyond Language: Cultural Interactions and Belongingness

Hearing but not listening. Social identification is often constructed and reinforced through dialogues using languages. Power dynamics exist throughout the

conversations, and language plays an important role in discourse distribution. In this study, while most participants feel English is no longer a barrier to them, they still feel ignored or alienated by native speakers. The difficulty of getting into a native community makes Chinese international students tend to stay together in their own community:

I feel that people are saying Chinese all stick together, but Americans have to reflect on themselves. How open they are accepting other population, other culture. I don't think they are good at this. Although they say here is a really diverse environment, sometimes, they just don't accept others. I know a lot of Chinese came here, they wanted to be into the American circle, they tried really hard. But ninety percent of them tried several times and then they went back to the Chinese circle. It's because maybe the Americans are not open. Maybe that blonde American, blonde circle is not accepting people from other culture. (Diana 2017)

Diana felt ignored in a class discussion with two American girls:

You know when you are in a class or when you are in a quiz section or whatever in a lecture, that asks you to talk to the people who sit next to you. If there are three persons, two blonde Americans, and one Asian, that is me. I feel like the other two have the tendency to talk more and ignore me. They don't look into my eyes when I'm talking. (Diana 2017)

Diversity and discourse have been popular topics for a long time and participants

had their own thoughts on these topics. Some Chinese international students made good friends with American classmates but some had bad experiences that make them think about the discourse problem from a different perspective:

It's so important to have people hear my voice. It's so important for me to not being ignored. I can definitely be quiet, but when I'm talking, please listen to me. It's not like I am quiet. It's not like when I am talking, you ignore me. That's not how things should be. (Diana 2017)

Building identity and belongingness. Stereotype and alienation are two different problems, but both of them are significant. Being judgmental can be destructive and stereotypes make it especially hard to communicate friendly between two different cultures:

I always feel they have a cultural stereotype. They just think that Chinese cannot read, that Chinese are stupid. Their stereotype is like, Chinese students are rich, they don't know how to speak English, they don't study. I know there's a stereotype that Asian students are pretty good at Math. But in other areas, I feel that they just don't want to talk to you. I think first, they look how you look. You are Asian. You are not American, you look different. I tried talking with those blondes, right? So you are being left out, until they realize that, oh my god, you are UW's officer (just for an example). Oh my god, Asian is an officer? They start talking back to you because you are in the popular circle. (Diana 2017)

Laura resonated with this feeling by talking about the offense she received when asked by some Uber drivers about her tuition fees and parents' salaries:

America is diverse in ethnicities but it's not diverse in thoughts. No. Why do people discriminate on everything? You can see their social and women discrimination. They are not diverse at all. They are just a golden appearance with empty inside. Many cultures emerge here, we cannot assume they understand each other. If they can understand each other, they won't do the gunshot, discrimination, protesting. That's too terrible. I don't feel safe here. American people say that, respect each other, don't judge. They never do that. They judge everywhere. I really hate when people say that Chinese people are rich. (Laura 2017)

Undergraduate Chinese international students face more complicated problems when it comes to identity construction. On one hand, they have to deal with the differences between Chinese and American culture, on the other hand, they can be alienated by Chinese community when their English sounds native:

One day I was in a class discussion, a group discussion, we had like two other Chinese in my group, and we've had the same group for many times. We've known each other already. I think one of them was trying to clarify her idea, but she was having a little bit of a hard time. She was trying to say it but other group members wouldn't get her idea. So I was like, I'm going to jump in and help her out. I asked her in Chinese, is this what you mean? And the two of them,

because they talk often with each other in Chinese, the other Chinese guy, he turned to me, and he was like, he was literally like this, speaking English to me like, ‘you speak really good Chinese.’ And I was like, I’m Chinese, I grew up in China, of course, I can speak Chinese. This is getting awkward.

...At that moment, I felt a tiny bit of betrayed. I thought it was quite obvious, it was obvious, I’m Chinese. I’m not anyone different. But afterward, I went to talk to the two of them, and they told me, they assumed not just because of how I was, but also because of the fact that I didn’t really approach them with Mandarin. They would talk to each other with mandarin all the time, like between the classes and between the two of them. That’s what they prefer. But I didn’t do that. They assumed that anyone else should be doing that. Maybe I’m just one of the weirdoes who doesn’t do that and they thought, ‘oh, she’s not (Chinese) because she’s not talking to us in Chinese. She’s not approaching us, she’s not getting tighter with the little circle’. I was like, ‘interesting’. It was not in my head until all of a sudden they did that to me, I was not, I was not accepted as one of them. Not accepted, not assumed, I didn’t get the automatic membership. (Sarah 2017)

Sarah’s experience shows that identity construction is closely related to language using. When a Chinese international student doesn’t approach others actively with Chinese, he or she can be easily excluded from the Chinese community. This exclusion does not always make “exiles” eager to turn back to their Chinese community. However,

it does influence their identity construction in a more implicit way:

I remember for my last quarter, I met with three Chinese, after the first class, they asked me some questions and I answered them. In the second class, they told me that they thought me as an American. That could be a problem? Maybe, I don't know. I'm kind of happy with that because I worked hard to practice my English, but I still want to preserve my identity. (Sandy 2017)

Discussion

Chinese International students do have their own strategies when learning academic content in English. Participants reported that reading and writing are the two most difficult parts for them and they are concerned about context understanding as well. Academic English is closely related to academic content. When the learning includes diverse background knowledge, it becomes more complicated and calls for more efforts.

Disciplinary awareness stands out in this study. Participants perceive that different disciplines have different demands of English abilities. English reading and writing in science can be easy to follow because of structures provided by professors, but challenging in humanities. Since many classes in humanities often require discussions and presentations, students feel that they have more opportunities to practice listening and speaking, and their abilities get improved. Kuo (2011) directly points out that lack of field-based English terminology might result in the difficulty of reading for international students who come from the countries where English is not a medium of

instruction.

As has been argued by other research, the first language can be a useful tool for second language learning. It was a popular belief that second language acquisition (SLA) is strongly influenced by the learners' first language. At the very beginning, people believed that first language interfered with the learning of second language.

However, recent studies are focusing more and more on the advantages of first language. The role of first language can be positive and helpful for the learning of second language. If strategically used, learners' first language knowledge can actually promote second language learning. Moll & González (1994) raise the concept "funds of knowledge" and enlighten the thought that students' communities and households can be resources for formal school education.

Lucas & Katz (1994) suggest that first language use and development can have psychological benefits for the learners: (a) it can make the students feel that they themselves are valued; (b) it can help reduce the degree of language and culture shock that students are encountering, especially when the learners are the new arrivals; (c) it can give students' first language a status more comparable to that of English, thereby empowers the students as well.

This positive attitude towards first language is based on the acknowledgement of multilingualism. While Otheguy, García & Reid (2015) conclude that bilingual individual has an internally unitary linguistic system and individual multilingualism should be rejected, advanced study by MacSwan (2017) puts forward an integrated

multilingual model of individual bilingualism, contrasted with unitary model and dual competence model. MacSwan argues that discrete languages and multilingualism do exist according to a lot of empirical and ideological research, thus codeswitching and mother tongue should be acknowledged and valued. Language alternation is systematic and rule-governed that in no way reflects a language deficit. Sayer (2013) says that translanguaging enables both teacher and students to create discursive spaces that allow them to engage with the social meanings in school from their position. Vernacular is a great resource for students when they learn English as a second language.

Paris (2012) offers a term *culturally sustaining pedagogy*, to support the value of multiethnic and multilingual present and future. He advocates for an education that honors the languages and literacies and practices of students and communities, and calls for “supporting young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence”. Through a meta-analysis of program effectiveness, Rolstad, Mahoney & Glass (2015) conclude that bilingual education is more beneficial for English-language learner (ELL) students than all-English approaches in increasing measures of students’ academic achievement in English and in the native language.

Chinese International students not only employ some regular strategies like taking notes or highlighting but also try to incorporate their first language carefully to help with English learning. The use of the first language often depends on individual language levels and situations. Beginners have the tendency to use translated versions

of materials more frequently while intermediate and advanced English learners choose to avoid such tools. Beginners, intermediate and advanced learners all have no negative feelings about using the first language informally in small peer discussions.

According to Perrin (2015), the ideal of the native speaker causes anxiety when learners of English have the desire to speak “perfect, standard” English. In the case study carried out between 2005 and 2007 with students studying on a pre-university program, a Chinese participant was reported to have great desire and need to acquire a perfect English accent.

The traditional ideal of pursuing native-likeness is still appealing to second language learners. However, they gradually develop the consciousness of accepting the imperfection. Learners try to balance second language learning and using the language from the perspective of pragmatism and value the effectiveness of communications more than accent, fluency, and perfection. “Standard English” is a penetrating concept influencing language learners not only in their language acquisition, but also in their identity construction and discourse empowerment.

Bakhtin’s (2010) dialogism addresses a new world with diverse viewpoints, experiences and values, encouraging diversity and heterogeneity in education. Social identification is often constructed and reinforced through dialogues using languages. This social identification is intertwined with learning in classrooms (Wortham, 2004). Bakhtin’s theory plays an especially significant role in language teaching, particularly for ELL students. As is inspired by Bakhtin, there is increasing agreement on the

awareness that “standard English only” ignores the diversity of students’ own cultures and languages. Rosebery (2010) puts forward that heterogeneity is fundamental to learning, which is consonant with Bakhtin’s idea of heteroglossia.

Pattanayak (1996) highlights the role of English in maintaining inequalities by noting the dependence of “non-English cultures” on “English-speaking countries” (p.150). Motha (2014) emphasizes “there is no one nation-state exerting control over economic and political processes-one of these economic and political processes, I contend, being English language teaching” (P.33). Nativeness often constitutes an endorsement of the idea that white people have privileged discourse of explaining what kind of English can be recognized as standard and correct English. Motha (2014) also criticizes invisible racism through English teaching, saying that we have created a climate for Bonilla-Silva’s (2013) “racism without racists” under the guise of correct grammar and pronunciation, and ideologies about nativeness. English is widely used as a lingua franca and continues to be understood as “foreign” in some areas, while being an official language in other contexts. These hierarchies of English have been unquestioned, contributing to the inequalities as well. According to Motha (2014), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) enforces both institutionally and socially the separateness and isolation or even societal divisions that exist outside schools to some degree. The influence of English teaching is profound and should be constantly discussed.

Based on my study, second language learners often struggle with belongingness and

they can hardly find a middle way. Learners who approach their first language community tend to stay within the community while those who never approach actively their first language community get exiled automatically, losing contact with their first language peers. There is also misunderstanding between different languages and cultures. The influence of stereotypes and power dynamics is penetrating. Chinese international students sometimes feel frustrated by such unsuccessful communication.

Conclusion

Influenced by the trend of globalization, American universities are accepting an increasing number of international students. Among them, Chinese international students take up a large proportion. Passing the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) does not mean they can rest easy. The difficulties of academic English reading and writing often perplex them and influence their learning motivations. It is crucial to know what specific difficulties they have and how they can solve the problems they face.

This study focuses on undergraduate Chinese international students' perceptions of their academic English learning and strategies they use to help themselves improve English. During the research, I found that English language acquisition is not only a part of academic learning, but also closely relates to intercultural communications and identity construction. Group memberships are largely determined by the languages being spoken. Belongingness is a significant and common concern for Chinese international students, which can result in clustering. This study reveals the perceptions

of Chinese international students' academic English learning, which is valuable for understanding how Chinese international students motivate themselves during academic learning. We can also assume some connections between their perceptions and self-efficacy as self-efficacy can be influential to academic performances in American universities.

For further study on Chinese international students' academic English learning, researchers can try to collect various data like students' academic documents, interviews with professors and field notes on students' learning activities to triangulate.

Besides, we can pay more attention to social interactions and their influence on second language learners' academic performance. Academic performance can be measured in various ways so that it will be impressive if some connections between social interactions and academic performance get discovered. What kinds of social interactions can significantly influence students' self-efficacy also remains a worth discussing topic for future research. The atmosphere on campus is certainly affected by social environment. As the United States is currently experiencing a historic presidential transition, constant cleavages among different ethnicities and cultures make it even harder for international students to position themselves. Second language learners' identity construction has always been a worthy research topic and more research can be conducted to study on how international students live in such changing social environment and find their own belongingness.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been in this university? Have you been to the U.S before?
2. Do you feel difficulty using English now? If you do, in what way?
3. What kind of support do you usually refer to when you have problems with English?
4. Are you allowed to use Chinese in your classes? How often do you have chances to speak Chinese in class?
5. What language do you prefer when studying academic content, English or Chinese? (which one is easier for you to understand?)
6. What kinds of strategies (if any) do you use to help with your academic English?
7. Will you use Chinese translated versions of materials when feeling difficult with reading?
8. Do you have a study group with Chinese/American students? How often do you meet? How do you feel in that group?
9. How do you feel when talking to Chinese peers? (not only academically)
10. What do you do when you get confused in your studies?
11. What do you think of your academic English proficiency?
12. Do you think it's important to speak English as native speakers?