

Difficulties of Chinese Students with Their Academic English: Evidence from a China-United States University Program

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Abstract: This study was conducted with four Chinese international students who were enrolled in a China-United States university program. It examined their difficulties in academic English through interviews, and the data were sorted into four categories: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

An increased number of Chinese students have come to the United States in the past decades. However, due to the possible language inadequacy, Chinese students encounter difficulties with their academic English while they study here. One issue is that the way students have learned English in their home country may not serve them well when they study abroad. Most Asian countries have been adopting a behaviorist approach toward English language education, from primary schools through college (Shih, 1999). Such an educational approach treats learning as a result of environmental stimuli, which requires few internal cognitive processes (Schunk, 2012). For English learning, the goal is to produce error-free sentences and give immediate Chinese-English translations (Shih, 1999). However, such an objective is generally achieved through students' self-study and by memorization of exemplary texts and vocabulary lists. The teacher's job is to explain grammar rules and examine students' learning results through quizzes and dictation. The construction of sentences is achieved by replacing words in the exemplary texts. English words are memorized without a clear understanding of their origins and semantic properties. When students study in the United States, they find that learning English is more than memorizing words; it is also understanding multiple meanings and contextual properties.

Difficulties encountered by ESL students could also be explained by Craig's (1999) communicative model. As Craig suggested, communication is an active information exchange process between the sender (speaker) and the receiver (listener). The sender generates thoughts and ideas, encodes them into words and sentences, and delivers them to the receiver. The receiver then decodes the words and sentences into his/her own understanding using his/her language knowledge; the process can be inhibited by several factors, such as background music, appearance of certain subjects, anxiety, and holding a certain stereotype. For ESL students, they often lack the background knowledge that can help them understand the language and worse still, they usually have high anxiety, which will hinder their understanding.

Speaking rate also becomes a problem for ESL students. Second language users generally require more time for the encoding and decoding processes (Braine, 1999). For them, neither encoding nor decoding occurs spontaneously, but by active reflection of language knowledge and use of cognitive skills (Chin, 2002). Also, students could experience negative feelings, such as anxiety and apprehension (Fu, 1995), which can further impede the learning process by increasing psychological noise.

Definition of Terms

The terms Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) were first introduced by Cummins (1979). As the names suggest,

CALP is referred to a “classroom language” or academic English, while BICS is a “playground language” or communicative English (Gibbons, 1991). Most English as a second language (ESL) students encounter obstacles in CALP because it has higher requirements in both literacy abilities and cognitive skills. To be fluent in CALP, users need to be able to use advanced vocabulary, be familiar with terminology in their specialization areas, and gain mastery in academic writing systems (Cummins, 1979; Scarcella, 2003). Users need to be capable of using higher order cognitive skills, such as creative thinking, hypothesizing, and deducting. In contrast, BICS only requires skills in conducting social conversations in daily settings, like a cafeteria, park, and school bus (Gibbons, 1991).

Research Questions

In this paper, the following research questions are addressed: (a) How do Chinese students enrolled in a China-United States program perceive the differences between academic English and communicative English? And (b) What difficulties with their academic English (in the areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing) do they encounter?

Method

This study was an exploratory case study conducted with four Chinese international students who were enrolled in a China-United States university program. This program was a two-year joint program in Master of Science program in engineer management. It was organized between a well-known Chinese university located at Beijing, China, and its U.S. partner. Students would finish their first year at the university in China and then were transferred to and graduated from the U.S. university (in the second year). Such joint programs became popular in China because students receive two degrees—one from the Chinese partner and one from the US partner—and get exposed to two cultures and two languages (L1 and L2) within two years, a relatively short period of time.

In this research, we recruited four students (four cases). The four students were selected because they have similar backgrounds. We had four male participants, who came to the United States and began to study here in 2013. They all major in Engineering Management. The TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) exam scores ranged from 70 points to 90 points. Generally, none of them was confident about their academic English proficiency.

It generally takes ESL students two years to gain proficiency in BICS and another three years to be fluent in CALP if they are totally immersed in an English environment (Cummins, 1979). However, in our research, the participants were enrolled in a two-year program. They did not have five years to prepare themselves in CALP. The participants took classes in English and lived in the United States. They lived in an area that was predominantly Latino/Hispanic, so they heard Spanish more often than English outside the classroom. Furthermore, due to their low proficiency in English, Chinese people usually stay inside their Chinese community. Such a community helps satisfy their social needs (Maslow, 1968) as well as provides them with group power. Therefore, the participants were less willing to develop social networks with other classmates. The social and language limitations were most apparent in one participant, who spoke some Chinese when he was interviewed.

The research was conducted by two graduate students from the university. The face-to-face semi-structured interpersonal interview was employed as the data collection method. Before interviewing the four participants, we briefly introduced the background of our research. We also gave them time to ask questions. Participants were allowed to use Chinese if it made them feel more comfortable and talk more. Every participant was interviewed twice: the first

interview was for one hour and the second interview was for half an hour. After the first interview, the participants went to classes. We believed that after being interviewed, they would be more aware of their language difficulties, which would help them explain their difficulties more clearly for us in the second interview. Altogether, six hours of data were collected from four participants, one and a half hours for each participant. We transcribed the recordings into eight transcripts, and translated the Chinese parts into English.

Findings

After we finished the research, we found out that the four participants had four major difficulties in academic English, which are the themes: (a) the differences between CALP and BICS, (b) accent, (c) speed, and (d) culture.

The Differences between CALP and BICS

Grammar complexity. The first issue we discovered among the interviewees was that participants were not clear about what CALP was. Based on the above literature review, CALP occurs in academic settings. The high complexity of grammar and vocabulary are attributes of CALP but not necessarily a pre-requisite. However, we found all four participants misunderstood CALP as a language with high grammar complexity, regardless of settings.

Terminology. All four participants reported that academic English contained a larger amount of terminology than Chinese. The participants found words had more than one meaning, and some were used specifically in the academic context. Examples included “enquiry” instead of “search” or “look up”; “verify” instead of “check” or “look at”; and “retain” instead of “keep” or “stay.” It also seemed that a dictionary was insufficient in helping the participant solve this problem. As one participant stated, “[The dictionary] only shows the normal meaning, and I clicked ‘search more,’ and I found the academic meaning.”

Participant A was using a dictionary application on his smartphone rather than a physical dictionary. By using a “search more” function, the application would obtain exemplary sentences from Google and from its own online database. By doing so, Participant A was able to find the academic meaning of the unknown word. However, traditional paper-based English-Chinese dictionaries generally do not include academic meanings for words. Hence, though four students reported a tendency to use a dictionary in class, they were actually using the “search more” function to find academic meanings for words, rather than using the dictionary itself, which provided only meanings in communicative English.

Accent

The professor’s accent. The university in this program welcomes international students as well as international instructors. International instructors help students to see problems from an international perspective, to analyze issues from another country’s angles, and to be open-minded to multiple perspectives. However, like the ESL students, ESL instructors usually have a foreign accent, and sometimes their accents cause difficulties for students. The situation was more severe if the professor was teaching a social science course rather than a STEM subject. Because social science subjects require more reading and oral interactions, lecturing was the primary teaching method. Participant A perceived the Business Law course as “my most difficult course,” not only because of its content, but “the professor, Dr. S., is a Cuban American, and his English has a strong Cuban accent. I try to follow, but after 10 or 15 minutes, I am lost.”

My classmates’ accents. Two participants (participants C and D) had difficulties understanding Egyptian and Indian accents. Though they reported that they did not have many opportunities to interact with them, difficulties were encountered when they were doing a group

project together. All participants recalled a case where an accent impeded communication while participating were in a group project with students from a non- English-speaking country.

My accent. It seemed an accent was not a major barrier for Chinese students in expressing themselves. Participant C commented that “the professor doesn’t care too much about the accent because I am not a native here.” Participant D also indicated that “my Chinese accent is not a problem when talking with teachers. Just like we can understand people speaking Chinese with foreign accent, they can understand us.” However, all participants complained that their accents influenced their presentations in class. When participants were delivering presentations, peers could not understand them well.

Speed

ESL learners usually need to pay more attention to the speakers’ words to be able to understand them. There is a decoding process when information is received in a second language, and hence ESL learners usually get lost if the speaker speaks too fast. Such a problem was reported by all four participants. “The professor speaks very fast and I cannot understand him,” said Participant C. “When we Chinese speak English, we speak word by word, but Indians can keep on talking and they do not need to breathe,” said Participant A. “It is very difficult for me to take notes when the professor speaks fast, especially those with accents,” said Participant B. “I sometimes wrote down a wrong word because of the professor joined two words together; it should be ‘active reader,’ but I thought it to be ‘accident,’” said Participant D.

Reaction time. ESL learners also need more time in constructing their sentences before speaking. Such a coding time decreases as the learner becomes more fluent in L2, usually after a longer time in immersion. However, our four participants had been in the United States for just about one year and had no study-abroad experience before. They all reported that they need more time to think. Besides, unlike English, there is no verb tense in Chinese, and there are no clauses (like attributive clauses) used. Such a difference also causes Chinese students to have difficulties in constructing English sentences. Participant A perceived it to be a general problem among Chinese students: “I think they [his Chinese classmates] need more time to react. When you understood, they moved on to digest the information. They [the professor and native speakers] have already finished the topic.” He also concluded that this was why Chinese students did not participate in class activities often.

Vocabulary size. All four participants mentioned that insufficient vocabulary size caused some problems. They all admitted that when they listened to lectures in class, the peers or the professors used new words, and those new words would cause great difficulties in understanding. In order to understand better, the participants would use dictionaries a lot, and some of them confessed that they did not have enough time to use dictionaries. If they used the dictionary a lot, they would miss some content because the class lectures would not stop because of them. In their field, they had a lot of new words to learn. Another difficulty was that some words had multiple meanings, but participants only knew one meaning. However, the one meaning they knew was not the correct one; hence, they felt confused.

Culture

Language is closely related to culture. Two participants mentioned that some language difficulties were coming from cultural differences. As persons who were not born and raised in the U.S., they had great difficulty understanding culture-related information. When the professor explained a theory, he/she would use some examples. These examples were sometimes bound by culture. Participant C said, “I always find it hard to understand the examples given by the

professor, especially when the examples are related to culture.” He also pointed out that when the peers told jokes, he was always not sure what they were laughing at because humor is something that is heavily loaded with cultural elements.

Language structure. Chinese and English are from two different language families. The way English is organized is different from the way Chinese is organized. One big difference is that in English, there are a lot of clauses, like attributive clauses. When the participants read academic articles, they would see a lot of long sentences, which sometimes made up a paragraph. When they read these long and complicated sentences, they struggle to find the subject and predicate in the main sentence, which would make it impossible to understand the sentence.

Tense problem. Verbs in Chinese do not have any tense. No matter when the event happens, the verbs will always be in the original form. This is another difficulty the Chinese students encounter when they speak English. Three participants stated that they always used the original form when they used verbs. Sometimes they would realize the mistake they had made, but they did not have enough time to rearrange the sentences. They were trying to produce accurate sentences, which would make them pause a lot when they talked to others. And they were becoming less confident because of the pauses.

Background knowledge. One of the participants mentioned during the interview that some of his peers had been working for many years and were very experienced in the field. So was the professor. In some in-class discussions, their peers would talk about something related to their work experience. When they talked about this, the participant could not understand them and hence, could not contribute to the conversation.

Discussion

Language educators have long used the concepts of four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Hakan & Azamat, 2014). So in this paper, we grouped the language difficulties in the four categories, too.

Listening

New words and terminology. Students perceived that academic English contains a lot of terminology. The meaning of those new terms could not be found in a traditional paper-based dictionary, but only through the Internet or in academic journals. Also, Chinese students reported having a limited vocabulary base; hence, many words used by the teacher were new to them.

Furthermore, one word in English has multiple meanings. In class, the teacher was using a word, but the meaning was not the common one, so the students felt even if they knew this word, they did not know what exactly the teacher was referring to without looking it up. Besides, unlike homework, class lectures are usually non-stop. Once the student stops to look up the meaning for new words, he/she misses the next sentence. To sum up, the number of new words, different meanings of one single word, and the inclusion of terminology made it difficult for Chinese students to fully understand what was lectured in class.

Speed and accent. We found speed and accent to be a significant factor in the area of listening. Because English is a second language to Chinese students, they need a longer time in understanding when information is received via listening. As one participant said, he needed to hear the full sentence and then was able to start the decoding process, while native speakers could start decoding while receiving new information. When they encountered professors who spoke fast, Chinese students would get lost. Therefore, it would become even more difficult for

them to catch up with what the professors said later on.

Also, when students pay attention to an accent, content is missed. There is a limit to people's cognitive load in their short term memory, and an accent can be perceived as an extra extrinsic load. In a class lecture, if the student pays too much attention to the accent, he/she probably loses the track of what the professor is saying. In class demonstrations or discussions, students cannot focus on the content as they pay too much attention to decoding the language, which makes them unable to interact. Moreover, speed and accent create a synergy, which makes the sentences even more difficult to understand.

Speaking

All participants had problems using academic English when speaking and wanted to learn it. Because of the differences between English and Chinese, Chinese students need more time to think and construct sentences before speaking. Most of them stated that although it was highly recommended that they should think in English, they actually could not. Also, accuracy and fluency were usually what they struggled with. Sometimes they needed time to produce accurate sentences, which was usually followed by a lot of pauses. All of the participants needed to do presentations in class, which was a big concern for them. They were nervous and lacked confidence in speaking in public.

Reading

Sentence structures are far more complicated in CALP than in BICS. Clauses and adverbials are used a lot in constructing sentences in CALP. When the participants read these sentences, they felt they were overwhelmed. In Chinese, there are no sentences like this. For them, it was not easy to tell the subject and predicate of the sentence when it is long and complicated with several clauses. If they could not find the subject and predicate of the sentence, they could not fully understand the sentences.

Writing

The difference between CALP and BICS. CALP is understood as a language used in classrooms and at conferences, while BICS is used in daily life with friends. The participants had a limited understanding of this difference and were confused about when to use CALP and when to use BICS. Students hence used CALP in settings where CALP was not necessary. In other words, they were extending the area of CALP.

Vocabulary for writing academic papers. As reflected by our four participants, there is more terminology in academic English than in communicative English. They tried to include terminologies into their own writings. They also perceived there was a need to use formal words and complicated grammar structures. However, they all felt less confident in using such words and grammar structures. The difference between the expectation and the actual ability caused difficulties in their academic writing.

Conclusion

It is true that all the students come to the United States to study with some language proficiency, but it is also true that the students are not as proficient as the native students here. Many course instructors take it for granted that all the students will follow what they say in class. According to our research findings, the students have a variety of difficulties that need the instructor's attention. We are hoping that this study can help the faculty be aware of the multilingualism of the classroom and of the students' language difficulties.

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