

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Chinese undergraduates face many challenges in learning the English language. The objectives of this study are to identify the challenges faced by Chinese undergraduates in learning the English language and explore the learning strategies to overcome the challenges. This study employed partly the quantitative research design of survey questionnaire to identify the challenges Chinese undergraduates encounter when learning English. Selected undergraduates were interviewed to find out the effective learning strategies to overcome the challenges. One hundred non-major English students studying in a higher education institution in China participated in this study. By utilising purposive sampling, six respondents who have passed the CET- 6 test and obtained high grades in the test were selected to find out the effective learning strategies to overcome the challenges. Research findings indicate that most of the undergraduates regarded the interference of the mother tongue as the biggest challenge, followed by a lack of motivation in learning English. A small percentage of the undergraduates stated that insufficient time and teaching method also hindered their learning of the English language.

Keywords: *Challenges, motivation, interference of mother tongue, strategies, teaching method.*

INTRODUCTION

English language is a dominant, global language today. Even though it is also gaining importance in China, many Chinese undergraduates face many challenges in learning it, indicating that there are some obstacles that are preventing the Chinese undergraduates from making progress in spite of their eleven years of learning English in schools. These challenges have hindered undergraduates from developing a reasonable command of English for application in real-life situations. They have resulted not only from the teaching and learning process but also from some other external factors such as the English language education, learning environment, and interference of the mother tongue. Hence, this study concentrates on identifying the difficulties and challenges that affect the Chinese

undergraduates in learning the English language as well as to find the learning strategies to overcome them.

Hu and Che (2005) state that teacher-centred learning is the main teaching mode in English language classes in China. The English lessons are delivered through lectures which introduce and present the knowledge or linguistic aspects of the language, with extensive explanation and question-and-answer sessions. Occasionally, the audio-lingual and audio-visual methods are used in the English class since grammar, translation, writing and reading skills are the key components which affect the students (Guo and Sullivan, 2012). The aim of the English language classes is mainly to ensure that the undergraduates can correctly construct sentences and translate from Chinese to English. Furthermore, not enough adequate practice is given to undergraduates to learn the language.

In addition, some universities require undergraduates to pass the College English Test (CET) with at least band 4 (CET- 4) upon graduation. The CET is regarded as an assessment that can predict an undergraduate's English language ability in China. The test is based on vocabulary memorization and understanding of grammatical rules. Without passing the test, undergraduates cannot obtain their bachelor's degree or become post-graduate undergraduates. Furthermore, the undergraduates need the CET certificate to indicate their English competence to obtain a desirable job. Zhao (2013) points out that the purpose of students learning English is to pass the exams required by the school. As a result, many undergraduates learned English with the main purpose of passing the English examinations rather than for improving their English proficiency.

Significance of the Study

Even though the undergraduates learned English from the first day of school, some of them still find it difficult to master the English language. The English language contributes to the development of the international trade and technology in China, and mastery of the English language is essential for the Chinese in today's globalised world. This study, therefore, is significant for the following reasons:

- 1) to identify challenges undergraduates are facing in learning and mastering English and
- 2) to help teachers develop more effective pedagogy to improve undergraduates' learning and mastering of English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides an overview of related studies regarding motivation in learning English, teaching method, and interference of the mother tongue in learning English.

Motivation in learning English

Mei (2007) examines the motivation of Chinese undergraduates in the learning of the English language with the aim of discovering what type of motivation is more useful in learning English. Based on Gardner's (1985) social psychological model, 921 female and 776 male undergraduates from five universities in China participated in answering the 37-

item English Learning Motivation Scale. The result revealed that motivation is a vital factor required for learning English (Mei, 2007). More than half of the undergraduates learned English because of the instrumental motivation which, according to Ong, Lam and Rodrigues (2018), is one of the factors that has a strong influence on language learning strategies used by learners. Without the pressure of English examinations, most Chinese undergraduates have no motivation to learn English, especially the undergraduates who passed the College English Test (CET) with at a minimal band 4. Logically, a Band 4 implies that the undergraduates possess the minimal qualification and command of the English language, but this is far from the truth. The exam merely tests on the linguistic competencies and not on the communicative competencies of the undergraduates. Briefly, the undergraduates are only able to regurgitate the rules of the language and would not be able to compose sentences in the language adequately. Furthermore, this research also revealed the relationship between motivation in learning English and their language proficiency. The findings of the research indicated that students were more instrumentally motivated than intrinsically motivated in learning English. Instrumental motivation for language learning includes passing a language requirement whilst intrinsic motivation would include deriving the satisfaction from the process of learning a language. According to Harmer (2003), undergraduates who are intrinsically motivated demonstrated a higher level of proficiency and intrinsic motivation has a tremendous effect on learning English.

Wong (2011) conducted a research to find out whether instrumental and integrative or intrinsic motivation has any significant influence on third-year Chinese undergraduates learning English. The Chinese undergraduates do not need English language for daily interactions as well as conversational purposes, and they only learn the language for utilitarian purposes, such as to build a successful career and to score well in an examination. It was revealed that instrumental motivation influences Chinese undergraduates more in the learning process as compared to integrative or intrinsic motivation. Responses from 50 Chinese undergraduates showed that most of them learned the English language due to instrumental motivation. This study further reinforces the reason why most of the Chinese undergraduates were unable to speak English sufficiently in their daily lives.

Meanwhile a study by Long et al., (2013) investigated whether the students' English language achievement is affected by students' motivation to learn. Data were collected from 45 respondents using questionnaires and the finding showed that most students have a relatively clear motivation to study. Some of the motivations include: procuring good grades in the examination with the prospect of securing a good job in the future, praised by their parents and teacher, feared the punishment they would receive if they failed to excel in the language, going abroad, and learning the language to improve their qualification and credentials. The students need motivation to help them learn English. Hence, it is left to the teachers to provide the motivation for them to learn the language.

According to Jing and Qing (2017), one of the reasons which caused the low motivation for most Chinese who are learning English is that the aim of learning English in China is not for communication but to pass the English examinations. Bawa and Watson (2017) further describe that due to the pressure of English examinations, the majority of the undergraduates feel that learning English is stressful.

To overcome the problem of the lack of motivation to learn English, Yue (2015) suggests improving undergraduates' learning motivation through reading English short

stories. Once they developed the interest of reading and learning English, it will further promote their motivation. It is also necessary to reduce the anxiety of the examinations. The anxiety and pressure of the examination can cause undergraduates to have a negative attitude towards the English language especially for weak undergraduates. Thus, the teachers should encourage and praise the weak undergraduates as much as possible to develop their self-confidence and guide them to possess a positive attitude towards the learning of English besides stimulating them to study English autonomously whether at school or home.

According to Long et al. (2013), some of the suggestions for teachers and undergraduates to improve motivation are firstly, establish the right perception of learning English that is, the purpose of learning English is to improve ones' own quality rather than because of external factors such as passing examinations. Secondly, develop the interest in learning English because interest is the best teacher for undergraduates. For teachers, they should try to change the minds of the undergraduates from 'I need to learn' to 'I want to learn'.

Furthermore, to draw the students' attention and cultivate their motivation to learn, teachers can make use of interesting activities which can provide more communicative opportunities in the class. They can also create a relaxing environment to lessen undergraduates' tension, making it stress free and encourage undergraduates to share their ideas and participate in the class. Once they find interest in the learning process, they will have the motivation to learn English. In a study by Yue (2015) on learning English and motivation among unsuccessful undergraduates in China, the researcher attempts to find out (1) what type of motivation had influenced the unsuccessful undergraduates when they tried to learn English, (2) which kind of motivation greatly influenced their learning of English, and (3) the strategies that could be used to increase the lack of motivation of the unsuccessful undergraduates. Based on the findings, the researcher found that it was difficult for Chinese undergraduates to be intrinsically motivated to study English. Within the Chinese context, there are only a limited, number of face-to-face contacts with English speakers. They can only depend on English movies and social networks which are the primary sources to have a connection with English native speakers.

Teaching Method

Wang (2007) conducted a research with the main purpose of observing how a college English language teacher conducted a cooperative learning lesson in class and compared them with the teaching of English currently employed in the classroom. Due to the examination-oriented nature of current teaching in China, the classroom is teacher-centred. With a big class, teachers still make use of this traditional exam-oriented teaching method. The researcher noted that there was little interaction among teachers and undergraduates. There were many problems with this exam-oriented teaching and learning process such as, teacher-centred mode of delivery, over-teaching, explaining, and drilling activities with little emphasis on language production, and the lack of creativity and interaction. Additionally, the observation of the class in cooperative learning environment revealed several shortcomings and difficulties in exam-oriented pedagogy such as free-rider effect, the unified course schedule, difficulties of designing meaningful activities, managing noisy and chaotic classroom, grouping the undergraduates, low attendance rate or distracted undergraduates and the need to evaluate a vast amount of undergraduates' test grades.

With the communicative language teaching approach gaining momentum in other parts of the world, Shan (2015) investigated the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach and its application which was introduced in China since 1980 and carried out in high school and college ELF classroom. Regrettably, though CLT is regarded very highly as an effective way of teaching English, it has not been fully implemented in China (Lin and Zhao, 2021). Even if there were attempts to use the CLT approach to teach English in China, the outcome is far from satisfactory. The findings indicate that the English classes are still teacher-centred, and the teaching materials do not possess the elements of communicative activities. None of the teachers implement the CLT teaching method in the English class. From the class observation, the researcher found that the role of the teachers is a controller or translator. Thus, the teachers' role needs to change from controller or translator to facilitator or observer. Lastly, CLT teaching method not only aims to develop students' communicative ability, but also promote the improvement of students' four language skills at the same times. However, grammar-translation method still dominates in the English class. Shan (ibid) points out that teachers should convey the right conception of CLT to undergraduates by helping them to understand the differences between communicative competence and grammatical competence. Teachers need to let undergraduates know that the learning of grammar is only a tool to use the English language instead of it being the ultimate learning goal. Moreover, the teachers should first change their roles from that of a leader to that of a facilitator or observer. Teachers must exploit the use of the communicative language teaching in the classroom, as well as allocating more time for oral practices, and to connect the knowledge of the English language with the real-life events or activities. Besides, Shan (ibid) suggests that teachers should emphasise communicative competence or fluency as one of the criteria to assess a student's English ability.

Interference of the mother tongue

Wang (2012) discloses that based on Selinker's (1972) interlanguage theory, interference of the mother tongue is one well-known reason for the popularity of 'Chinglish' or Chinese English. The finding also illustrated that 'Chinglish' is affected by the syntactic transfer from the Chinese language and insufficient practices in using English. Chinese undergraduates are not aware of the differences at the syntactic level between English and Chinese languages. Firstly, English is based on the basic subject-verb structure whereas the Chinese language is topic-prominent, thus leading to little understanding of the subject-verb structure among Chinese undergraduates. Secondly, Chinese undergraduates rely excessively on using the Chinese way of thinking to learn English. Wang (ibid) suggests that Chinese undergraduates should be aware of the differences between English and Chinese languages at the syntactic level. In order for the Chinese undergraduates to improve their command of the English language, they must adjust their thought patterns through watching more English movies to observe how native speakers organize their sentence structures, speaking English as much as possible, establishing friendship with the English language speakers and participating in the English language events or activities to bring about changes in their thought patterns.

Luo (2014) did a study on the interference of Chinese pronunciation and English language learning with the aim of analysing the factors that caused the interference in English pronunciation and to provide some suggestions to overcome the problems of Chinese undergraduates learning English. From the data collected, the researcher

summarises that the dialect pronunciations influenced the English pronunciation. The undergraduates who are from China's southern provinces of Sichuan, Chongqing, and Jiangsu found it difficult to distinguish the English pronunciation between the alveolar nasal sound [n] and the alveolar liquid lateral sound [l]. This phenomenon could have derived from the Chinese dialect pronunciations. For instance, if the undergraduates from Lanzhou or Chongqing want to say "He is very sad" in Mandarin, the correct pronunciation is 'Ta hen NAN guo', whereas, they would pronounce it as 'Ta hen LAN guo'. In Jiangxi province, to distinguish the sound [f] and [h] is a problem. For example, 'lake' will be pronounced as 'fu' rather than 'hu' in Mandarin. Undergraduates are likely to use their hometown dialect when they communicate with friends who are from the same place, which is not good for undergraduates learning English especially from the aspects of English sounds. Therefore, when these undergraduates pronounced English words like "knife," it would end up as "life"; or "need" as "lead". Luo (ibid) refers these as the interference of mother tongue in learning English. This problem can be reduced substantially if the undergraduates know the differences between the dialects and Mandarin, and with teachers identifying the kinds of mispronunciation that will occur when learning English.

In another study conducted by Chen and Li (2016), the researchers examined how the interference of mother tongue caused mistakes in writing by Chinese undergraduates and offered suggestions on how to overcome these mistakes in their writing. They found that Chinese undergraduates do not possess good writing skills mainly due to the transfer of the mother tongue. According to contrastive analysis, interlanguage theory and error analysis theory, the positive transfer is considered to be helpful when learning English while the negative transfer has a negative effect on learning English. Their findings showed that positive transfer is not obvious in Chinese undergraduates in learning English.

On the other hand, there were some problems with negative transfer as a result of using the rules and knowledge of the mother tongue such as incorrect usage of the word class, verb tense, word order, and omission of words. Chen and Li (2016) proposed that to reduce the negative transfer, undergraduates should understand the English culture which can help them to enhance their thinking patterns and reduce the Chinese ways of thinking and interference of mother tongue. Meanwhile, both teachers and undergraduates need to pay attention to the positive transfer of the mother tongue.

In a more recent study, Huo (2017) examined the impact of the negative transfer of the Chinese language on learning English with 20 participants from Sichuan University selected to sit for a test in interpreting the Chinese language into English. The result showed that there were different degrees of negative transfer of mother tongue when interpreting the Chinese language into the English language. The negative transfer of mother tongue at lexical, syntactical, and cultural level can lead to pragmatic transfer resulting in some negative impact on cross-culture communication. For example, word redundancy manifested at lexical level. "参观考察 (visit and inspect), 旅游度假 (travel and holiday), 投资兴业 (invest and develop)" are words frequently used in Chinese business speech. "旅游 (travel)" and "度假 (holiday)" almost have the same meaning in the Chinese language. Besides "参观考察 (visit and inspect) and 投资兴业 (invest and develop)" are mostly to produce some forms of pattern and rhythm. Some undergraduates interpreted "参观考察 (visit and inspect)" word by word as "to visit and inspect the company" and interpreting 旅游度假 (travel in holiday) as "to spend a vacation and have a holiday" and interpreting 投资兴业 (invest and develop) as "make an investment and start business".

According to Huo (2017), to prevent the interference of the mother tongue, there is a need to, firstly, accumulate lexical schema and choose flexible strategy as schema is the knowledge structure stored in our brains and when we are learning English, we are building new schemas in our minds. Therefore, Chinese undergraduates should try to develop their English language lexical schema and accumulate as many idiomatic expressions as possible or building blocks in English. Secondly, ensure that there is improvement in the teaching of interpretation, focusing on teaching undergraduates how to accurately translate Chinese language into English language.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs both quantitative and qualitative research designs. Using a questionnaire is a good way to get first-hand information among Chinese undergraduates in a higher education institution in China. Meanwhile, interviews are ideal for interviewing participants who are not hesitant to speak, who are articulate, and who can share ideas comfortably (Creswell,2012).

This study focuses on exploring the challenges the Chinese undergraduates faced and how these challenges influenced their learning of English. The aim is to identify these challenges and get insights from the Chinese undergraduates concerning the kind of motivations which are useful for them to learn the English language and the effects of the interference of the mother tongue on learning the English language. One hundred participants from a higher education institution in China participated in this study. The instructions are given in the questionnaire, which help participants understand the purpose of this research, the research questions, and how to do the questionnaire.

Instrument

The questionnaire used in this study consists of six parts. All the items are close-ended questions. Part A is about the respondent's personal details, for instance, gender, year, duration of learning English, their level of English proficiency. Part B is designed to investigate the difficulties that prevent them from learning English from the respondents' point of view. Part C is designed to investigate respondents' reasons and intentions for learning English, further exploring what kind of motivation is affecting Chinese undergraduates in English learning. In Part D, the participants answer items on the effects of teaching methods. Part E has details on time allocation of learning English. Part F explores the interference of the mother tongue while for part F, undergraduates are required to rate each question according to a five-point Likert scale of strongly agree (5), agree (4), neutral (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1).

This questionnaire is reliable as the questions were adapted from a few published researches. The reason and intention of learning English section was adapted from Wong (2011), the items in the teaching method section were adapted from Julius (2013), and the section on the interference of mother tongue was adapted from Dong (2014). The questionnaire provides data regarding the challenges as well as reasons and motivations for learning the English language from the perspectives of various undergraduates.

Interviews are conducted with 6 selected respondents who have already passed the CET-6 test and who had obtained high grades in the test to provide ideas for overcoming the challenges of learning and mastering English. Each interview is conducted individually in a conversational manner after the questionnaire had been administered. Interviews were conducted in a non-threatening environment to help respondents express their feelings towards learning English. The respondents need to respond to four questions. Each student should provide suggestions for the four questions. The first question, 'How would you overcome the low motivation in English language learning?', was adapted from Qi (2014). The second question, which was adapted from Kumar and Sailaja (2015), is 'How do you think the English teacher should change the way he/she teaches?' The third question 'How do you avoid and overcome the interference of Chinese in English?' was adapted from An (2016). The last question 'How would you overcome the problem of lack of sufficient time to study English in the university?' was adapted from Sundqvist (2008).

Data collection

The data was collected using an online survey questionnaire. One hundred respondents from a higher education institution in China participated in the study using simple random sampling method to collect the data. The simple random sampling refers to everyone having an equal chance of being selected (Fang, 2013). As for the six participants for the interview, purposeful sampling was used.

Procedure of data analysis

Step 1: Calculate the percentage of each statement in Part B, C, D, E, and F.

Step 2: Use descriptive statistics to describe data and display the data through graphs in each Part.

- (1) Part B summarised the factors the undergraduates saw as the challenges to learning English, such as motivation and interference of mother tongue.
- (2) Part C summarised the reasons and intentions to learn English, such as to pass exams, or to enjoy English movies or music.
- (3) Part D summarised whether the teaching method played an important role in learning of the English language for Chinese undergraduates, such as the translation teaching method which limits and influences Chinese undergraduates' English communication skills.
- (4) Part E summarised how much time Chinese undergraduates spent in learning the English language every day.
- (5) Part F summarised the problems interference of the mother tongue had in learning the English language, such as the syntactic negative transfer.

Step 3: Interpret the solutions which participants prefer to utilise to overcome the challenges.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data Analysis and Interpretation of Research Question 1

Research Question 1: What are the challenges faced by the Chinese undergraduates in learning the English language?

- a) What is the challenge that is most frequently faced by Chinese undergraduates in learning the English language?
- b) What is the challenge that is least frequently faced by Chinese undergraduates in learning the English language?

There are mainly 4 challenges faced by Chinese undergraduates such as interference of the mother tongue, motivation, time allocation and teaching method. Forty-two percent of the respondents state that interference of the mother tongue is the most frequent challenge for Chinese undergraduates learning English. At the other end of the spectrum, only 17% of the respondents indicate teaching method used as a challenge for them. About 21% of the number of respondents state that motivation affects the learning of English. Another 20% of the respondents feel that time allocation influences the learning of English.

Zhu (2010) demonstrated that it is unavoidable for Chinese undergraduates learning English to be affected by the Chinese language. Ellis (1999) believes that first language will interfere with the undergraduates' second language acquisition due to differences between the two languages.

Undergraduates' motivation towards English learning

Regarding Chinese undergraduates' motivation towards learning English, 29.5% of the respondents explain that the aim of learning English is to obtain a degree, which is the highest percentage. Very few respondents (4%) mention that they learn English because they want to understand the English lifestyle and culture, and 4.5 % indicate that they learned English due to the strong emphasis by the Chinese government. Another relatively high percentage (13%) of the respondents learn English language as they think it will someday be useful in helping them to get a good job. Approximately 10% believes that it will help them when they go for overseas trips to experience a foreign culture or to take an English language test for going abroad. The other intentions that motivate them to learn English are, enabling them to be involved in international business, conversing with more and varied people in the world and enjoying foreign music, sports, or movies, (less than 10%). Motivation is a significant and decisive factor related to undergraduates' English performance (Hill, 2003). Seda and Zahitjan (2016) further add that the more motivation learners have, the more successful they would be in the learning of English.

Undergraduates' attitude towards teaching method

It is noted that more than a quarter of the respondents (26%) consider that teachers are not providing the favourable English learning atmospheres and opportunities to communicate with speakers of English in class, and this has been identified as the greatest challenge in teacher's teaching techniques. On the other hand, only 6% of the respondents mentioned improper teaching as a challenge. Meanwhile, one-fifth of the respondents (20%) said that they experienced flexible teaching methods and rich classroom activities when studying in a

student-centred learning environment. This is consistent with the result obtained by Yang and Yuen (2014) who claim that teacher-centred learning is widely used in Chinese universities.

From the findings of the study conducted, 80% of the respondents remarked about the negative evaluations of teachers' teaching such as the English class is boring, cannot attract their interests, no learning atmosphere, and the teaching is not flexible enough. Li (2009) says that when teaching the English language, Chinese teachers often concentrate on strengthening undergraduates' abilities to take exams, or what Hughes' (1989) called the negative washback effect. This kind of teaching poses a challenge and explains why the English class is unappealing, while giving no opportunities to undergraduates to interact with English speakers.

Time allocation for learning English

30% of the respondents have only half an hour to study English every day while 21% of the respondents state that they lack time to study English as they have to take too many professional courses. However, 17% of the respondents show their interests in learning English which can last for two hours every day and 19% of the respondents have more than two hours to learn English every day. It is interesting to note that two-thirds (64%) of the respondents do not have at least two hours every day to learn English. Pearson (2004) states that when trying to acquire a language, time is needed. If little time is allotted for learning the language, the knowledge and practices are limited, and little learning would be achieved. Thus, students who have more time for learning English, including extra classes outside the classroom, will achieve better English proficiency than those who did not have. (Sylvén, 2004: 2006).

Undergraduates' attitude towards interference of mother tongue

26% of the respondents 'agree' that Chinese thinking pattern influences foreign language learning and another 26% of the respondents 'strongly agree' that Chinese thinking pattern influences foreign language learning. As pointed out in the introduction of this research, Chinese thinking used indirect expressions to avoid refuting others, while English thinking pattern is more direct because they prefer to directly express their feelings frankly saying "no" to others without hurting other's face value (Jin and He, 2013). This is a major contributing factor linked to the interference of the mother tongue. Interestingly, an equal number of the respondents (26%) disagreed with that factor. The rest of the respondents (22%) were not sure whether their learning of English will be affected by the Chinese thinking pattern.

About 24% of the respondents 'strongly agree' that their pronunciation of Mandarin influenced their pronunciation of their English language and 35% of the respondents 'agree' with it. This is congruent with Zhang and Yin's (2009) view that second language pronunciation will be influenced by the mother tongue. A small number of the respondents (18%) remarked that English pronunciation has no association with the Mandarin pronunciation whereas 23% were 'not sure'.

Additionally, what is interesting is that 42% of the respondents 'strongly agree' that Chinese dialect pronunciation influenced English language pronunciation and 32% also 'agree'. This is in accord with a study by Luo (2014), which states that Chinese dialect pronunciation has a great effect on those undergraduates who rely on the dialect to pronounce the standard English pronunciation. Merely 18% of the respondents 'disagree' while 8% of the respondents were not sure about it.

Data Analysis and Interpretation of Research Question 2

Research Question 2: What are the strategies to overcome the challenges in the learning of English among the Chinese undergraduates?

Based on the data collected from the interviews, the following are some of the strategies suggested to overcome the challenges in the learning of the English language.

How would you overcome the low motivation in learning the English language?

"...I would like to find some friends to study together and organize a learning team. We know that it is an interesting process when undergraduates discuss and learn from each other. ...they can see that they are making progress for a common goal....and a lot of supports and encouragements will be acquired, that would make undergraduates more positive and incentive." (CI_S1) (CI Conversational Interview); (S1: Student 1)

Student 1 suggests forming a study group to learn English. Studying with peers will make everyone who participates in this study group feel relaxed and happy. In a study group, the members are not only striving to accomplish a personal goal, but also required to help the peers achieve the goal. Every student tries to make an effort to provide support especially when a group member asks for help. This is quite beneficial to the group as it inspires undergraduates to become interested in learning English. Besides, when they learn English together, they can encourage and support each other. In the same vein, Gao and Cheng (2003) state that ample opportunities and steady encouragement and support are the main factors to cope with a demotivated situation. For student 1, undergraduates who lacked motivation and incentive to learn English, would gladly accept the encouragement and support. Therefore, student 1 thinks this strategy of forming study groups will improve undergraduates' learning of English.

"...Changing the way you think about studying English and English test, which can improve the low motivation. Studying and grades are not a measure of your self-worth. Don't feel that the English tests are an impossible task. Lessening the test anxiety is vital for learning motivation." (CI_S2)

Student 2 proposed that the purpose of learning English has to be relooked and sitting for the different kinds of English test is an effective way to overcome the lack of motivation. One should not be learning English just to get higher grades. One needs to bear in mind that the grades cannot measure one's worth. Undergraduates should not blindly prove their language ability through test scores and certificates. Instead, they should try to change their perception of learning English and reasons or purposes for taking the English test, learning to reduce the pressure and anxiety, and developing their passion and

motivation for English learning. This concurs with Liu and Jackson's (2008) view in which they identify that language test anxiety has a negative correlation with the ability to learn English among Chinese undergraduates. This implies that if the test anxiety is low, the ability to learn English will be better. This aligns with Krashen's (1988) affective filter hypothesis in which Krashen claims that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, a low level of anxiety and extroversion are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. In contrast, low motivation, low self-esteem, anxiety, introversion, and inhibition can raise the affective filter creating a 'mental block' that prevents comprehensible input from being used for language acquisition.

"Replace negative or self-defeating thinking. Instead of this negative chain of irrational reasoning, you might think, "I will work hard to pass this test. If I failed I can study more effectively...reduce the feeling of learning English is a burden. Then enhance their motivations."(CI_S2)

Student 2 further feels that to reduce the test anxiety, the Chinese undergraduates need to face the examination with a positive attitude. As mentioned earlier, do not regard the test scores as a criterion to assess your command of the English language. Rather, see the test as a process of testing the status of your current English ability. Test anxiety associated with language anxiety due to unrealistic expectations affect one's language achievement (Horwitz, 1986). Student 2 suggests learning to eliminate the negative thinking of the English tests and the test grades will reduce test anxiety, and this will help undergraduates to perform better.

"Promoting undergraduates' learning autonomy is very important for increasing the motivation of English learning. Autonomy promotes undergraduates' involvement in class activities, such as entering an oral training class. There are many opportunities to practice your oral and participate in activities as much as you can." (CI_S3)

Student 3 believes that to overcome the lack of motivation in learning English, Chinese undergraduates must be actively involved and engaged in class activities. This is supported by Wang (2014), who reiterates that providing a good learning atmosphere helps to intensify the undergraduates' autonomy to learning. Hence, student 3 agreed that English oral training class is the best approach that can offer more opportunities for Chinese undergraduates to interact with classmates and exchange ideas in class.

"Because of the traditional educational background in China, a few opportunities to participate in the whole class. Rely more on the teachers, undergraduates lack initiative and learn passively." (CI_S3)

The whole enterprise of teaching and learning in class is controlled by the teachers in most of the English classes in China. Little opportunities are provided for undergraduates to take part in the class, and the knowledge they learned is mostly given by the teacher. As a result, undergraduates tend to lose their motivation for self-learning. Subsequently, student 3 advocated that enhancing the undergraduates' involvement is a necessary means to boost the lack of motivation in learning. Undergraduates should participate in oral English training class, which constantly encourages undergraduates to organise their views and speak out in class to share with their classmates. This kind of environment is helpful in preventing over-dependence on teachers. To acquire the skills of how to cultivate an autonomous learning habit are the significant strategies to motivate student to learn

English. Liu and Zhou (2004) define autonomous learning as a great strategy that may help support undergraduates to take charge of the learning process and develop motivation and independent learning.

How do you think the English teacher should change the way he/she teaches?

"It is the best for teachers to create an English learning environment that dominated by the undergraduates, give undergraduates opportunities to participate in the class activities, group discussions, and more practices to communicate with classmates and teacher now the university undergraduates, we need to cultivate the ability of self-learning. "(CI_S1)

Student 1 pointed out that teachers should change the way they teach from teacher-centred to student-centred learning. The aim is to develop the students' capacity of self-discovering and self-learning in the university. Thus, the teachers should not excessively control the undergraduates in the class for fear that some undergraduates may become overly dependent on the teachers. Conversely, provide the undergraduates with more speaking opportunities and activities to develop their self-learning ability and make the English class more interesting and exciting. Wen and Clement, (2003) emphasize the use of the communicative approach to learning English. The ability to get meaning across and the pleasure in communication are good ways to increase the enjoyment.

"teachers can provide more communicative opportunities. Apply more ways to motivate undergraduates to use English in life rather than taking notes and feel boring in class. And build a real English environment. "(CI_S2)

Student 2 suggested that teachers should develop a dynamic learning environment that provide more opportunities for Chinese undergraduates to communicate. Student 2 also recommended that teachers should relate the English language to reality as well as create actual English surroundings or a cooperative classroom atmosphere to alleviate the passive role of undergraduate in the English class. Hack (2012) says that student-centred learning is important for creating a favourable class environment. Hence, making a harmonious environment is meaningful for students to overcome their inhibitions to converse. Various activities should be used to grasp undergraduates' attention and turn the English class into a more interesting and exciting experience.

"...give opportunities for the undergraduates to govern the class time. Increasing more activities for us to talk as much as we can. If teacher still wants to teach undergraduates through traditional teaching, please put more relevant, interesting the lectures... Don't always help us English exercises. "(CI_S3)

All three respondents (students 1, 2, and 3) hoped that teachers would not impose too much control over the class. Student 3 believed that teachers who insist on using the traditional way of teaching, such as completing more exercises, will not be able to promote learning English. Instead, as mentioned above, teachers must incorporate other measures such as creating a learning environment and organising communicative language learning activities aimed at activating learners' interest in language learning (Yan, 2004). Besides, Zhang (2010) holds the view that teachers should be opened to using more up-to-date teaching techniques instead of just relying on the traditional pedagogy.

How do you avoid and overcome the interference of Chinese in the English language?

“Compare and summarize the usage habits of two languages. Compare the expressions of vocabulary, pronunciation, idioms, thinking patterns and sentence patterns to understand the similarities and differences.” (CI_S4)

When it comes to the problem of interference of the mother tongue, student 4 came up with the idea of making a contrastive analysis between the English and Chinese languages to help Chinese undergraduates comprehend the differences in the use of the two languages. It is thus necessary for learners to be conscious about the linguistic differences between Chinese and English (Yang and Ma, 2013).

“Regardless of different usage habits undergraduates would be paying more attention to what they need to learn and avoid making errors” (CI_S4)

According to Odlin (1989), contrastive analysis is still the most powerful tool to predict possible mother-tongue interference. The student pointed out that raising the awareness of the similarities and differences between the two completely different languages would allow Chinese undergraduates to perceive potential errors and pay more attention to avoiding them.

“... a good basic knowledge of English Vocabulary and Grammar. We need to put the new words or grammar in a familiar context which has a connection with how to use the vocabulary within different patterns and various grammatical rules in all kinds of situations.”(CI_S5).

Student 5 preferred constructing a good basic knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical rules for Chinese undergraduates to resolve the interference of the Chinese language. Chinese undergraduates generally are more inclined to use rote memorisation of the words when taking examinations that do not leave a deep impression in their minds, and are easy to forget (Richard, 2001). Hence, this student said that focusing on understanding the words and grammar connected with the real-life situation will help Chinese undergraduates remember more easily and correctly apply the grammatical rules and word choice into various context. Yang and Ma (2013) also feel that teachers should particularly impart the new English words and syntactic structures in detail since it is the most significant problem that causes writing mistakes.

“First, should expose to as much listening standard English as possible in the context of a mute period before engaging in oral activities... Not only include test-like listening comprehension activities in the traditional e.g., answer the question or true or false make undergraduates focus on pronunciation and intonation (e.g. take part in the activity which involves matching words to sounds).” (CI_S6)

As for the issue of Chinese dialect pronunciation affecting the English pronunciation, learning to speak a second language means acquiring new pronunciation habits and overcoming the biases of the first language (Turner, 2006). This is exemplified in the work undertaken by Hu (2015), who suggests repeatedly practising pronouncing the sounds until the sound becomes easier to pronounce and focus on the shape of the mouth to revise the pronunciation. Therefore, Chinese undergraduates must overcome their Chinese pronunciation habits and get accustomed to pronouncing English words accurately. In

addition, Student 6 suggested to listen to standard English as much as possible and paying attention to the pronunciation and intonation. For instance, participating in more activities including matching words to sounds, which is a helpful strategy for undergraduates who have the severe dialect accent to amend their pronunciation, instead of following the traditional listening practice that commands undergraduates to answer the question or choose the true or false option during the listening process.

How would you overcome the problem of lack of sufficient time to study English in the university?

“The most relax and easiest way is adding a lot of songs in English in order to familiarize your brain with the language...Your ear will start getting used how to pronounce some words, expressions and more...Start watching movies and series in English free time.” (CI_S4)

Two solutions were offered to overcome the challenge of insufficient time for learning English. First, student 4 highlighted listening to more English songs in order to know the English pronunciation. At this point, it is not important to understand the meaning of the words/songs. Another suggestion is to watch English movies to grasp more everyday English phrases and sentences. This is helpful for undergraduates to apply the knowledge and rules of the language they learned in class to connect to reality.

“Look through the overseas website and social networks such as Facebook, Instagram. For example, everybody knows that the first icon below the picture posted by your friend on Facebook is “Like”, the second is “Comment” and the third one is “share”. (CI_S5)

Student 5 reported that social networking is a valid way of learning English when we do not have enough time to study. Nowadays, technology will help us study. By looking through the foreign website, even if we are not good at understanding the English language, learning English autonomously on the Internet can spread knowledge from inside the class to outside class (Mohammad, 2011). Therefore, a virtual environment is generally seen as a useful and enjoyable way to deal with the problem of insufficient time for enhancing English language skills (Higgins, 2009).

“Many websites often update some English materials, you can choose to follow some English-related articles and learn the phrases and sentences they published. You can give the comments and your ideas. your questions to discuss and even debate with you.”(CI_S6)

Some websites like meetup, omigle, chatroulette where one can chat, debate, and make new friends with the English speaker not only help us to study, but also provide a platform to compare comments, discuss and even critique and argue. During the discussions and debates, it consolidates undergraduates’ knowledge of the English language and motivates undergraduates to speak the language when they are exchanging their views (Sundqvist, 2008). In addition, without the pressure of having to introduce themselves in a real classroom in front of other undergraduates, it enables undergraduates to mitigate anxiety and tension. Furthermore, Sundqvist (ibid) also explains that the application of Internet technology has considerably broken the limitations of space and time in class.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was designed to meet the needs of Chinese undergraduates who face the challenges in learning English. It is recommended that further studies be conducted on a bigger population of Chinese undergraduates who are from the other universities in order to reduce limitations, since a small number of participants cannot be the basis for a general conclusion. In addition, further studies that use comprehensive samples from the different levels of the university as well as direct observations and pilot surveys can identify the problems in learning English.

The findings of this study revealed some important practical implications for Chinese undergraduates as well as teachers. The study has demonstrated that motivation, interference of the mother tongue, time allocation and teaching method are essential factors influencing the learning of English in China.

In addition, this study also has brought about the realisation to both the teachers and Chinese undergraduates the importance of learning English. First, it helps Chinese undergraduates understand that the purpose of learning English in China is not just to get a job or obtain their degree. The Chinese undergraduates should change their perception of learning English. Second, language learning must take into account the language learning context. To help the Chinese undergraduates enhance their achievement, it is necessary to pay attention to the content of English education, including curriculum, textbooks, learning activities and tasks to enable undergraduates to personally find it meaningful to learn English and construct their relationship to the globalised world as speakers of English. Additionally, through this study, teachers need to be aware that the Chinese undergraduates should focus on cultivating their interests and positive attitudes towards learning English by using better teaching methods, such as cooperative learning, or communicative language teaching. Besides, teachers can provide more opportunities for the Chinese undergraduates to immerse them in the English language environment by promoting meaningful interactions using English and making the classroom environment more conducive to language learning. Tan, et al. (2016) also emphasised that, language learning activities that are created in a safe and stress-free learning environment help to reduce and remove the fear of learning English. It is also imperative that teachers help the Chinese undergraduates internalise their goals for learning English instead of just focusing on passing exams (e.g., CET4) or courses.

CONCLUSION

This study identified four challenges faced by Chinese undergraduates in learning the English language. They are motivation, interference of mother tongue, insufficient time, and teaching methods. Most of the respondents feel that the challenge of interference of the mother tongue has the most influence on the Chinese undergraduates while the teaching method used in the teaching of English has the least influence on the Chinese undergraduates. Under such an environment, there is no doubt that the mother tongue of the students has an influence on the English grammar rules, vocabulary, thinking pattern, writing and syntax.

The strategy to overcome the interference of the mother tongue is to build a basic knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical rules to connect to real-life experiences. This is

to overcome the inaccurate word choices and grammar structures. As for the problem of English pronunciation, the strategy is to keep on practising and focusing on the pronunciation, intonation, and eradicate your biases of the mother tongue.

The strategy to overcome the lack of motivation to learn/master English include creating study groups to learn, discuss and exchange information with each other. The encouragements and support from each other can help to build up motivation. Besides, these undergraduates must understand their purpose of learning English and change their negative perceptions of the English language and English test. Students are to participate actively by being involved and engaged in the activities in the English class, as this can trigger their interests as well as get them to prevent the over-dependence on teachers.

For the Chinese undergraduates who find that they have insufficient time, it is a good idea to make use of social networks to gain new English information or consolidate information through the internet and foreign websites. English songs and English movies can easily be accessed and downloaded to help student familiarise with the English language and gain more exposure to spoken English.

Finally, teachers should change the way they teach to student-centred learning so that the Chinese undergraduates will enjoy and gain from participating in the various activities to motivate them to learn English.

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