Problems Chinese International Students Face

during Academic Adaptation in English-speaking Higher Institutions

by

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A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Education

in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction

Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

The current research presents a review of literature that addresses issues Chinese international students face while adapting to English academic communities. The main problems, including language difficulties and challenges with pedagogy, suggest many Chinese students are not well-prepared in terms of English language proficiency and knowledge of host academic cultures before they begin programs. The findings of this review shed light on understanding these difficulties and have practical implications for English language teachers in China as well as for educators in host academic communities. Moreover, insights into these academic adaptation issues may help future Chinese students prepare more effectively in advance of studying abroad, as well as provide international student program planners and support teaching staff in host universities with insightful information about effectively supporting international students.

Key words: Chinese students, difficulties, English-speaking, higher education

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Personal Motivation for this Study

This study was designed to review the literature that addresses issues Chinese international students face while adapting to English academic communities. My research interest in the topic initially grew out of my own learning and teaching experiences. I received a bachelor's degree in education and practiced as a teacher for 18 years in China. In Chinese classrooms, teachers are expected to be figures of authority and to spend the majority of class time giving an organized lecture, while students are expected to listen carefully and to answer questions raised by their teachers. This was the model I experienced, and I went on to teach my students in the same way. However, my first cross-cultural experience working as a Chinese language teacher at an American international school in a South American country challenged my beliefs in teaching and learning practices. At that school, academic subjects were mostly taught by certified teachers from English-speaking countries like the US, Canada, Australia, and the UK, whereas the students were from diverse cultures, including American, Colombian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Brazilian students. At the end of my first class, a Colombian student told me that my class was pretty boring. I realized my teaching style might not work well at this school, and turned to my Western colleagues for help. They invited me to observe their classes for comparison. After observing some language and social studies classes, I identified the biggest difference: there were many interactive activities in their classes, whereas my classes consisted primarily of lecturing. Therefore, I devised some collaborative class activities to engage my students. For

example, I changed the way I taught new vocabulary. Instead of simply presenting all the new words to the students in preparation for their next reading, I gave them a short passage to read in groups of three, and asked them to figure out the meaning of the passage on their own. Each group was asked to create new-word flash cards on Quizlet (a website for vocabulary learning) and present them to the class by the end of the period. The students were allowed to use any resources available, such as Google Translate or other online tools, to figure out the pronunciation and definitions of the new words. These activities worked very well, because the students did the research and learning on their own. This teaching experience awakened my interest in the cultural differences of pedagogy.

Another cross-cultural experience occurred in fall, 2014 when I began my graduate program at the University of Victoria (UVic) in Canada. It had been a long time since I'd been a student, and this was a very different academic setting from what I'd experienced in China. As a result, I encountered a number of difficulties. First, I realized that my English language competency was insufficient to meet the standards for academic studies in Canadian institutions of higher education, even though I had been studying English for years. The new words I came across in my first class—e.g., *epistemology, empirical*—made it difficult for me to understand the lecture. Additionally, I found my spoken English was insufficient for communication in the classroom, and I found it challenging to read journal articles that ranged from 20 to 40 pages in length. The worst realization was that I had no idea how to write essays, since I had not had much practice in English academic writing when I was at university or after graduation. It took me a week to complete my first writing assignment: a five-page essay, as I had only practised writing English assignments of 250 words or less for proficiency test taking. These are some examples of the language problems I encountered.

Second, I discovered even more challenging problems related to different approaches to learning and teaching. My experience was what Griffiths, Winstanley, and Gabriel (2005) called learning shock: "experiences of acute frustration, confusion and anxiety experienced by students who find themselves exposed to unfamiliar learning and teaching methods, bombarded by unexpected and disorienting cues, and subject to ambiguous and conflicting expectations" (p. 276). I assumed that I knew something about Western education from my experience as an English learner and from my experience teaching in South America. However, I was proven wrong when enrolled as a full-time graduate student in a Western classroom. Take group work for example: in a two and a half hour-long class, my professor sometimes only spoke for less than ten minutes. Instead, the cohort was divided into groups to discuss assigned readings or new topics suggested by the professor. In other words, in class we learned not from the professor, but mainly on our own. All of my instructors assigned group projects as well as individual projects as assessments of our learning. I had come to see that group work could be a good means of engaging my students, but never expected it to be the dominant approach to learning, teaching, and assessment, as practised in this Canadian institution of higher education. Thus, my personal experience made me curious to know whether other Chinese international students experienced the same difficulties and/or challenges when adapting to an English learning environment.

Internationalization in Higher Education

My interest in this topic was also affected by the fact that the population of Chinese international students in western universities has been increasing rapidly over recent years. According to the 2015 Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Students Studying Abroad (H. Wang &

Miao, 2015), the total population of Chinese students studying abroad was approximately 3,058,600 between 1978 and 2013. But in 2013 alone, 413,900 Chinese students studied abroad, and the majority of them chose to pursue degrees in Western institutions of higher education. In English-speaking host countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the US, and Canada, Chinese international students made up between one quarter and one third of the international student body (H. Wang & Miao, 2015).

Post-secondary education in English-speaking countries appeals to Chinese students from Mainland China. Not only are these host countries well known for their high quality of education, but their language and immigration policies make English-speaking countries attractive (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013). This opportunity for overseas study is the outcome of investment on three levels. At the state level, English has been a compulsory subject in China from Grade 3 to postgraduate programs (although the starting grade may vary a little depending on location) and every year, thousands of students and scholars are funded by the state to study abroad. At the family level, more Chinese parents can afford their children's pursuit of higher education overseas. According to the report, after the year 2000, the number of students funded by families began to surpass that of students funded by the state (H. Wang & Miao, 2015). At the individual level, a great many Chinese students study hard for years for the opportunity to gain overseas academic accreditation, in addition to gaining English language improvement and cross-cultural experiences.

Chinese international students in English-speaking countries have received much attention in research, because they are reported to have encountered more difficulties in adapting to English-speaking academia than students from Indo-European language-speaking cultures (Senyshyn et al., 2000, as cited in Andrade, 2006). Therefore, it is necessary to gain insight into

the extent and nature of the problems Chinese students encounter during their academic adaptation. An investigation into the causes of these issues may help to inform some implications to mitigate academic adaptation issues. This would benefit all parties involved in intercultural interactions at English-speaking universities.

Research Path, Strategies, and the Scope of Literature

My own cross-cultural experiences stimulated my passion for this research project. I began my search with Google Scholar, and got around 240 results by entering *Chinese international students* AND *learning experience* AND *English-speaking*. Out of the first 30 items, a research paper entitled "Current Research on Chinese Students Studying Abroad" (Henze & Zhu, 2012) attracted my attention as it provided an overview of various areas of research on the subject of Chinese students. Regarding the problems encountered by Chinese students, two studies (Pan, Wong, Joubert, & Chan, 2008; Sun & Chen, 1999) identify different areas of difficulties. Sun and Chen (1999) studied a group of 10 Mainland Chinese students at a U.S. university. Their structured interview and questionnaire data suggest the students encountered three areas of difficulty: language ability, cultural awareness, and academic achievement. In another study (Pan et al., 2008) the researchers identify five major areas based on their data collected through questionnaire responses of 606 Chinese students studying in Australia and Hong Kong: language, academic challenges, psycho-sociocultural issues, financial issues, and political issues. Though language and academic issues are overlapped in these two studies, the researchers used different standards to define them. Sun and Chen (1999) define language issues as being students' difficulties with oral communication in and out of the classroom as well as problems with

academic writing, whereas Pan et al. (2008) define language issues only as being difficulties with understanding and speaking English in daily life. While the latter study categorizes academic issues as "difficulties with course work, research, and teaching assistance; becoming involved in class discussions; making oral presentations and taking exams; becoming accustomed to different classroom communication styles and types of interaction from those of the origin country; and adjusting to changes in curriculum in the multicultural classroom" (Pan et al., 2008, p. 221), the former study mainly includes students' difficulties with dealing with different learning and teaching styles and academic conventions. It seems that the widespread influence of English language on students' academic, personal, and social lives contributes to a constant interplay and overlap between these classifications. For example, issues with course work such as reading academic subject materials or academic writing are considered to be both language problems and academic problems.

A third paper (Yan & Berliner, 2009)—referenced in Henze and Zhu (2012)—examines the most stressful aspects of academic life among 18 masters and doctoral students majoring in science, social science, education, and business in the U.S. Their semi-structured interview data suggest contributing factors mainly include language deficiencies and ineffective interactions with faculty. By language deficiencies, the researchers mean the students have difficulties with understanding lectures, speaking in class discussions, and writing academic papers. With regard to ineffective interactions with faculty, three out of four factors are language-related problems: language abilities; verbal passiveness; and using an indirect mode of communication. The fourth factor is lack of independent learning attributes. This confirms it is very difficult to fully separate language problems from other academic issues. At the same time, these findings have highlighted students' difficulties with becoming an expected tertiary student and being actively

involved in class discussions. However, it seems that the researchers emphasize the challenges resulting from ineffective communication with faculty but ignore potential effects caused by a third party: students' classroom peers.

A literature review I found via Google Scholar ("Transitioning Challenges Faced by Chinese Graduate Students," Huang, 2012) reviews many empirical studies. The author contends difficulties with dealing with a new approach to learning and teaching during students' transition periods should be given particular attention. For example, class or group discussions held in and outside of class that function as an approach to learning and teaching are unfamiliar to Chinese students. This is consistent with the findings in Sun and Chen (1999). From the references in Huang (2012), I found Gu (2011). Based on the results of several studies she performed on Chinese students in the UK, Gu (2011) lists three major domains of challenge: academic, social, and cultural. The academic challenges Gu noted resulted from an unfamiliarity with different learning and teaching approaches in addition to language deficiencies in the new learning environment. Data she collected from interviews with British lecturers confirm that the expected Western independent learning style is alien to Chinese students (Wong, 2004, as cited in Huang, 2012). The teachers interviewed stated, "Yes, they have serious difficulty adjusting to expectations of British education system . . . we are trying to encourage an autonomous approach to study . . . they are expecting to be told what to learn, what to read" (Gu, 2011, p. 222). This echoes Yan and Berliner's (2009) finding that Chinese students lack self-directedness in learning and depend on guidance from their supervisors and teachers. Therefore, challenges with transitioning to English academia should include difficulties with becoming independent learners and difficulties with participating in collaborative learning and teaching activities (group work) in English learning contexts.

Based on the findings of the aforementioned studies, I decided to organize the issues addressed in my literature review into two main sections: (a) language and language-related problems and (b) difficulty adjusting to a new learning and teaching approach. Though this categorization may result in some unavoidable overlaps due to the pervasive impact of English language on all areas of this paper, hopefully this framework will yield some fresh insight into the problems under discussion.

In addition to Google Scholar, I searched the Summon database through UVic's library for peer-reviewed journal articles in the discipline of education by using the search string "Chinese international student" AND (university OR "post-secondary" OR college OR "higher education") AND (English-speaking OR western), and I got 154 results. At the UVic D-space I located a master's thesis (Shi, 2007) on Chinese students' classroom learning experiences.

Out of hundreds of search results I chose 25 empirical studies. At first, I only skimmed titles and abstracts. I excluded some studies published before the year 2000 in order to focus on the most recent findings that may be more significant to current educators and students. Second, studies on Mainland Chinese students were given priority in my selection process. Third, while skimming, I looked for specific words like *language difficulties /barriers*, *independent or autonomous learning approach/style*, or *group work*. Lastly, I turned to the reference lists from other reviews of the topic. After carefully reading over 70 relevant papers, I chose 25, consisting of mostly small-scale qualitative and a few mixed method studies. The majority of the papers fit into the category of *language and language-related problems*, and fewer and diversely focussed papers were combined into the *different learning and teaching problems* category. As the search term *Chinese international students* was a very broad term, out of 25 articles three seminal articles (Durkin, 2008a; Holmes, 2004; Wong, 2004) I harvested from the references include

Asian students or Confucius-heritage or Chinese-heritage students. But I chose them for the review because their participants from the Mainland made up a large proportion. Finally, for the review I also added two well-cited seminal articles (Kaplan, 1966; Mohan & Lo, 1985) that address Chinese students' English writing, in order to present a more complete picture of students' problems with academic writing.

I used a thematic-synthesis method (Thomas & Harden, 2008) to identify the themes in relation to students' problems. Regarding language and language-related problems, I created a chart with five columns: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and other interesting findings. While I was carefully reading each article, I took down the difficulties/challenges reported by the participants or analyzed by the researchers. The following descriptive themes emerged: speed, accent, unfamiliar vocabulary, silence or inactive verbal participation, interactive communication, reading speed and strategies, subject content, rhetorical organization, and academic conventions and expectations. As stated, I was initially going to organize the first section of the review according to language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, communication is a recurring theme in the literature, thus I combined listening and speaking into one category: oral communication in academic contexts. Thus, oral classroom communication (mainly with teachers), reading academic English, and academic writing are the categories that constitute the first section. Only the most reported descriptive themes are chosen to be discussed.

Likewise, I created another chart and took down the reported problems concerning different approaches to learning and teaching in two columns: independent learners and participating in group work (mainly interaction with peers). The most important descriptive themes within the category of independent learning are: responsibility in learning and critical thinking. The descriptive themes within the group work category are: negative attitudes, face,

and inactive participation. Therefore, I created two categories in the subsection of independent learning: locus of learning and critical thinking; and two categories in the subsection of group work: pedagogical factors and cultural factors.

Literature Review

The research literature suggests two main areas of difficulty Chinese international students face during academic adaptation: (a) language and language-related problems and (b) difficulty with different approaches to learning and teaching. The specific language difficulties reported by Chinese international students in small-scale qualitative studies have not yet attracted much attention. The same is true of the difficulties with approaches to learning and teaching in such studies. In this review, therefore, language difficulties and difficulties with adapting to Western approaches to learning and teaching, together with any possible causes, are discussed in two sections respectively.

Language and Language-related Problems in Academic Contexts

Before being admitted to study in English-speaking universities, Chinese students take language tests, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOFEL) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), to demonstrate that they have gained the required levels of proficiency for academic studies in English. However, these enrolled students still report a great deal of language difficulty after they start their programs. For example, Chinese students express concern about the adequacy of their listening and speaking skills in order to effectively communicate with their teachers and peers in the classroom and perform academic readings and especially academic writing—which they report as being particularly frustrating (Edwards, Ran, & Li, 2007). In the rest of this section, thus, three subsections are reviewed: (a) oral classroom communication, (b) reading academic English, and (c) academic writing.

Oral classroom communication. Chinese students reported they were unable to understand lectures or seminars and found it difficult to verbally respond to their teacher's questions or to participate in class discussions (Holmes, 2004; Shi, 2007; Wan, 2001; Wong, 2004). Using the thematic-synthesis method (Thomas & Harden, 2008) I created three categories that could be used to summarize the difficulties Chinese students face: (a) speed and accent, (b) vocabulary, and (c) interactive verbal participation.

Speed and accent. The rapid speed of English speakers in the classroom contributes to Chinese students' listening comprehension problems, and consequently makes it difficult for them to respond to teachers and peers. This problem is common—it was reported by the students in almost all the reviewed studies conducted in various educational settings. For example, Holmes (2004) studied a group of 13 Chinese students in New Zealand, and found that the students were unable to keep up with the normal speaking speed of instructors. The same issue was also reported in studies conducted in Australian, American, and Canadian higher education settings (e.g., Shi, 2007; Wong, 2004; Xue, 2013; Yan & Berliner, 2009; Zhang & Zhou, 2010).

The participants in these studies are conscious and reflective of the issue. For example, a female student at an American university (Xue, 2013), explains, "In China, we practised listening using Standard English materials" (p. 7). By *Standard English* she means audio materials in textbooks or test materials for EFL teaching and assessing that were recorded mostly in model English with an artificially controlled steady speed. The listening speeds in Chinese College English Test Band Four/Six, for example, vary from 130–150 words per minute to 160–180 words per minute (Sang, 2010), which are obviously slower than natural speeds that are adopted in the language tests like IELTS (which uses 220–300 words per minute; Sang, 2010). Therefore, it is understandable that Chinese students find it difficult to understand faster speeds

of speech because they may have only been temporarily exposed to normal speeds when they were preparing for tests like IELTS.

In addition to insufficient exposure, another potential reason is many Chinese students may lack experience in following English speakers in a real-life context. In other words, their previous listening experience in an academic setting to a large extent was with listening comprehension exercises in EFL classrooms or language test settings, when they were usually provided with some written materials as contextual information. Holmes (2004) found "they became confused when teachers departed from notes projected overhead" (p. 299). This demonstrates how Chinese students are not well-prepared to follow English speakers without any written information.

Along with the issue of speed, accent is also reported to have contributed to listening difficulty. While the participants in some studies (Holmes, 2004; Wong, 2004; Zhang & Zhou, 2010) mainly report having difficulty understanding the accents of multicultural faculty members, the students in Shi (2007) also had difficulty understanding the accents of their international peers. Similarly, the students in Xue (2013) complain about the various accents of their American peers. The difficulties with accents of peers reported in these two studies may result from the fact that these participants were graduate students who took more seminars in which they worked with peers, whereas the participants in the first three studies were mostly undergraduate students who most likely took more lecture-based courses.

While Chinese students complained over the New Zealand, Australian, American, or other accents of their teachers and peers, one might wonder which accent might not bother them. The comment made by a student regarding "Standard English materials" (Xue, 2013, p. 7) may provide an answer. The student was referring to the recorded model English used in their

textbooks and learning materials. Given that most textbooks used in Chinese schools and universities are in British English, for example, the New Standard English textbook series (jointly published by Macmillan and FLTRP, China's largest educational publisher), used by over 23,000,000 school students in 2009 alone ("60 Books Published," 2010), many Chinese students are primarily exposed to recorded model British English. Therefore, for many Chinese students, lack of exposure to a variety of English accents other than the model British accent might account for their issues with accents.

Speed of speech and use of accents that are different from recorded materials students were used to can become the obstacles to their listening comprehension. This issue implies the necessity for an increased range of English speakers in the recorded audio materials for EFL learners. The students' accounts of difficulties with speaking speed and accents also suggest they are short of experience in verbally interacting with English users from different cultures. The nature of the issue of speed and accent suggests it would be a temporary problem. That is to say, the problem would wear off as time elapses. This is supported by the acknowledgement in previous literature reviews (Andrade, 2006; Henze & Zhu, 2012) that students do adjust to various accents and speeds of speech over time.

Vocabulary. New words or unfamiliar expressions generate difficulty with oral communication. This happens when students' current range of vocabulary and grasp of complex sentence structures are not at the level of competency required for oral communication. Students in some studies reported feeling confused by unfamiliar words used in lectures or seminars, or find that they are unable to come up with appropriate words when they try to answer or participate in discussions. For example, in Wan (2001), one participant majoring in science revealed that he would only answer his teacher's questions if the answer could be given in a few

simple words. Otherwise he would remain silent, even if he knew the answer, because he did not know the English words required to explain his answer.

Within the reviewed literature, I noted three types of vocabulary difficulty. First, students lacked the exact words and expressions for classroom oral interaction. For example, in a study conducted at the University of Reading (Edwards et al., 2007), students realized the "mismatch between language learned in China and language encountered in the UK" (p. 390), made it difficult for them communicate orally. That is to say, the English they had previously learned sounded too *formal* and seemed inappropriate for oral communication in a natural setting. The second type of difficulty encountered by students is their limited knowledge of specialized words used in specific subjects. Shi (2007) is the only study I came across that points out students in an EFL learning context may have limited access to specialist vocabulary in their subject areas. However, this is not an issue only for Chinese students, but also for native speakers who are newly exposed to subjects. This is reflected in the words of a British research participant (Edwards et al., 2007), who reported that domestic students in the UK also struggled with jargon, for example, a word like "multiplier" used in the language of economics. It can be predicted, however, that most Chinese students may experience more challenges than native English speakers in dealing with such words.

The third of type of difficulty is with idioms, humour, or some examples used by native teachers and peers, which causes listening comprehension problems for Chinese students. For example, in Holmes (2004), students reported more confusion when their instructor tried to explain a new concept in a humorous way. The students Y and F in Wan (2001) mentioned their confusion caused by the use of idioms. Likewise, students reported difficulty in understanding some examples used by teachers when they attempted to explain subject matter. The MBA

students in Shi (2007) found it difficult to participate in the classroom discussion when their instructor chose hockey team management as the topic, since this discussion was based on a popular Canadian sport that is unfamiliar to most Chinese students.

It is well acknowledged that idioms and local expressions are some of the most difficult aspects for learners of English to master. This is also true of humour and teaching examples based in a specific culture. Reported problems such as these may appear to be linguistic problems stemming from listening comprehension or speaking ability; however, they are problematic because they also come from a lack of cultural understanding and familiarity. Because of their implicit meanings, idioms, humour, and a variety of teaching examples can only be understood in light of a natural or acquired cultural awareness. It is obvious that Chinese students do not have access to the necessary cues that domestic students do.

Such difficulties with vocabulary suggest that many Chinese students enter Western universities with an inadequate level of language proficiency and a limited knowledge of the host culture. They also indicate a learning gap between what has been taught in previous EFL classrooms and what is required for verbal communication in English learning contexts. In addition, the findings raise concerns about the validity of language proficiency tests like IELTS and TOFEL in terms of accurately assessing the listening and speaking proficiency of candidates.

Interactive verbal participation. Chinese students have little experience with cooperate oral communication in the classroom, although it is very common in Western settings. In this context, they have difficulty with verbal participation. Domestic teachers tend to believe students' incompetent English language proficiency is the cause of their lack of participation in class (Edwards et al., 2007). The participants in some studies also report their own underdeveloped listening and speaking skills as the primary cause of their struggles, and they

believe their unsatisfactory aural and oral skills are due to their previous EFL instruction. Since their participants experienced similar Chinese educational backgrounds and postgraduate learning experiences in English-speaking higher education settings Shi (2007) and Wan (2001) confirm that EFL instruction at all levels in China focuses primarily on grammar, translation, and vocabulary building to prepare students for different levels of examinations, and neglects to develop students' aural and oral skills. For example, the students in Shi's (2007) study report that their English teachers did not speak much English and often spoke Mandarin to explain English texts. They also mention that their teachers did most of the speaking in class.

Other research results are not fully consistent with the students' reports from Shi (2007) and Wan (2001). EFL teaching approaches other than the traditional grammar-translation teaching model were adopted among different levels of English learners in China. For example, a communicative teaching approach which emphasizes interaction and thus benefits the development of listening and speaking skills was first introduced in China in the early 1990s (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). There is further evidence that the communicative approach has been adopted in English teaching. To understand the challenges Chinese students met in the UK, Gu and Schweisfurth (2006) conducted two studies: one based on a group of 13 university students in the UK, and the other based on EFL teachers at several Sino-British English Language Teaching projects in China. Their university-level EFL teacher participants showed a greater preference for communicative language teaching and reported that the positive effects of this approach were reflected in the classroom as well. This evidence suggests that there are attempts to incorporate a more communicative approach to EFL teaching in China, but the evidence from students' reports indicate that these changes in some places may not have supplanted the dominant traditional EFL classroom practices.

Possible language insufficiencies alone do not explain the issue. Zhang and Zhou (2010) conducted a study of Chinese students' (both undergraduates and graduates) first year of study in a Canadian university, and their analysis of the survey data, drawn from 76 students, and qualitative data, drawn from semi-structured individual and focus group interviews of 17 students, supports that oral classroom communication in English is one of the biggest challenges for Chinese students. In the study, they identify a special group among the Chinese international student population: graduates from English-medium schools in China. The research suggests these students who are assumed to have better listening and speaking skills still encounter difficulty with interactive communication in the classroom. However, no more details about the size of this group of students or any proof of these students' listening or speaking proficiency were provided. At least, this finding indicates there must be some other reason for students' low levels of verbal participation.

Cheng and Erben (2012) explain Chinese students' low levels of verbal participation from a psychological perspective. They found Chinese students show a tendency to avoid using English because they suffer *language anxiety*, a specific type of anxiety related to second language performance (Horwitz et al., 1986, as cited in Cheng & Erben, 2012). Cheng and Erben investigated levels of language anxiety among a group of 156 Chinese graduate students from various programs in a U.S. learning environment, by adopting a modified version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS developed by Horwitz et al., 1986). Their analysis of survey and interview data from 12 randomly selected individuals indicates that all participants had high levels of language anxiety during the initial stages of their various programs. By this, they mean that when speaking, participants worried about whether their expressions were culturally acceptable, or understandable, or grammatically correct. With their high levels of

language anxiety, the students tended not to communicate with native speakers. Language anxiety, universally suffered by second language learners, affects students' confidence in their use of English. It may limit verbal participation between students with immature language proficiency and those with well-developed language abilities.

Unfamiliarity with the Western classroom communication style is regarded as another cause. That is to say, differences in pedagogical approaches lead to difficulty for students. According to Holmes (2004), Chinese students are used to a straight, directive communication style between teacher and students in a lecture-dominated mode of teaching, and thus do not know how to involve themselves in class discussions in which multi-direction communication takes place. This is evidenced through the students' accounts in Wan (2001), in which they indicated that, in their eyes, interactive American classroom communication seemed *informal* and *chaotic* because they were used to the *formal* and *controlled* question-answer communication between teachers and students. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and informal meetings in both of these longitudinal studies. The language used in interviews in Holmes (2004) was English and in Wan (2001), Chinese. This seems to make the conclusion more convincing.

Two studies (Ranta & Mechelborg, 2013; Shi, 2007) that took place in Canadian learning contexts suggest Chinese cultural values restrict students' verbal contributions. Fear of *losing face* was reported by many students. In Chinese culture, people feel they *lose face* when they make mistakes in public. Thus, students may avoid making mistakes by keeping silent if they feel insecure about what they want to say. In addition, the participants in Shi's focus group interviews reported that sometimes they did not ask questions or respond actively to topics under discussion because they did not want to waste their teacher's and classmates' time when

uncertain if their questions or opinions were relevant to the topic. Shi therefore interprets her participants' limited verbal participation as a reflection of Chinese collectivist culture. In other words, Chinese students focus on the interest of the whole group rather than their individual interests. This finding confirms that not speaking much in class is not necessarily an indication of difficulties with communication but rather a reflection of Chinese traditional cultural values. In a longitudinal research project (Ranta & Mechelborg, 2013), Chinese students' exposure to English was measured with computerized logs. The data suggest Chinese students prefer a receptive use of English over an interactive use both in and outside the classroom. And it is suggested that a low level of willingness to communicate in English with native speakers may be the cause of little verbal interaction. This low level of willingness is considered to be rooted in Chinese traditional cultural values. However, no further information is provided as to whether a low level of willingness in the first language affects communication in the second language.

These studies under review attempt to explain the issue of interactive communication from different perspectives, including language skills, pedagogical, cultural, and psychological perspectives. In this sense, limited interactive verbal participation is a complex issue. Next to incompetent aural and oral skills, the cultural perspective appeared in the literature as a more frequent cause of limited interactive verbal participation. Whereas fear of *losing face* is widely reported and interpreted, there is a lack of further in-depth exploration on the connection between coming from a collectivist culture and exhibiting a low level of willingness to participate in verbal discussions. As Chinese students do not constitute a homogeneous group, within the group, diversity in cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds, together with different motivations for learning and personality factors may also affect student levels of verbal participation in the context under discussion.

Reading English for academic purposes. In the articles selected for review in this paper, problems with reading English for academic purposes are only discussed in four studies (Edwards et al., 2007; Holmes, 2004; Shi, 2007; Skyrme, 2007). These problems include reading speed, workload, and reading strategies.

Host teachers and researchers have discovered Chinese students read academic materials at a slower pace than their domestic peers. Chinese students in Holmes' (2004) study read very slowly in contrast to the students from New Zealand, and often read the text twice. Similarly, British teacher participants in Edwards et al. (2007) commented that the Chinese students could read only a couple of pages at a time when required to read academic writing. Though it may be difficult to judge whether these students' slow reading speed or repetitive reading is a reading strategy or problem, it is apparent that this slow speed is not what host teachers expect, and that Chinese students have to spend much more time dealing with the same reading load than do domestic students.

However, the students did not self-report that they read slowly; rather, they complained of heavy reading loads. For example, the business student participants in Shi (2007) and all the participants in Holmes' (2004) study reported having a *heavy* reading load. There were no further details provided on the reading loads, for example, whether their local peers also considered the load to be too heavy, therefore, it is difficult to judge whether reading loads were particularly heavy or not. However, it is apparent that the reading loads assigned by teachers were not expected by Chinese students.

While Edwards et al. (2007) report the issue with readings from teachers' perspectives and Shi (2007) from students' perspectives, Holmes (2004) highlights both the teachers' and students' voices. Reading speed and loads are in essence the same problem. That means if

students read fast enough, then reading loads may not seem as heavy. Thus, there exists a gap between the expectations of host teachers and Chinese students in terms of reading English for academic purposes.

Researchers tend to believe Chinese students may lack the expected strategies for reading academic content but none of the participants in the reviewed studies reflect over their reading strategies or skills. Using data from semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, Holmes (2004) found that participants were not used to reading strategies such as analyzing, comparing and contrasting, and extracting ideas from reading materials. This finding suggests that, in a Western learning context, students are required to respond to academic readings critically by employing analysis, comparison, and evaluation. This expectation may pose potential difficulties for Chinese students. Skyrme (2007) also found that the Chinese participant in her study lacked the expected reading strategies. In her longitudinal research project in a New Zealand university, this participant, Mike, gave up on his readings altogether because he found them to be of little help in understanding the class lectures. Skyrme believes Mike failed to extract meaning from the readings and collaborate this insight with the content of his teacher's lectures. These reported reading problems imply that expectations for academic reading in English learning contexts is different from those in a Chinese learning context in terms of quantity and quality, and the gap caused by different expectations can result in reading difficulties for Chinese students. However, it is interesting that participants did not report or reflect much on any problems with reading strategies. One possible reason is that they may in fact have confidence in their reading abilities (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006).

Academic writing. Another major language challenge for Chinese students is with academic writing. According to Zhang and Zhou (2010), writing papers is a challenge for

Chinese students, especially those majoring in the humanities or social sciences, and even students who graduated from English-medium schools in China admitted their writing abilities were not up to par for the requirements in Canadian universities. One student in the UK commented, "My supervisors find it hard to read my work…. That means my own writing is not good enough" (Edwards et al., 2007, p. 390). Though individual writing problems may vary significantly within disciplines or genres of writing or personal writing experiences, there are some general problems. Using the thematic-synthesis method (Thomas & Harden, 2008) these reported problems fall into the following four categories: (a) vocabulary and sentence-level accuracy, (b) rhetorical organization, (c) subject content, and (d) English academic writing expectations and conventions.

Vocabulary and sentence-level accuracy. One commonly reported writing problem is difficulty dealing with vocabulary, sentence level accuracy, and grammatical correctness. In an earlier study (Mohan & Lo, 1985) a developmental approach was used to explain why Chinese students tend to cite linguistic problems such as vocabulary and sentence variety as their major concerns. In Chinese students' previous writing experiences, the accuracy of words on a sentence level and grammatical correctness were the dominant criterion used in evaluating essays. After they studied 3700 essays by students in Grades 8 and 12 from British Columbia and Hong Kong and also interviewed English teachers, Mohan and Lo (1985) concluded that the students' previous English writing experience influenced their perception of what the important aspects of English writing are. Their subsequent survey of a group of 30 Chinese students enrolled in Canadian higher education about their current writing problems confirmed this conclusion that the students' perceived writing difficulties were the result of previous experiences having their writing evaluated.

This conclusion is partly supported by one student's account in Turner's (2006) study of participants in a one-year master program at a UK business school:

Here lecturer is focusing on the idea not the grammar or something else like some little things. But in our country, we learn English just as a foreign language, so when we learn the writing we just focus on the grammar or the vocabulary, something like that. So when I feel like finish this essay quite successfully, but maybe the idea is not good and I didn't support my topic enough, use enough material to support, so that is not, so I didn't get the high mark. (p. 39)

These comments indicate that the student is aware that her previous writing training influenced her academic writing in the new learning context. In addition, the student seems to have accepted that expressing ideas using Western logic is more important than simply translating ideas with accurate words and grammar.

This developmental factor is key to explaining students' writing problems in English learning contexts. For example, in a study by Qian and Krugly-Smolska (2008), three graduate students in electrical, mechanical, and chemical engineering all cited limited vocabulary, sentence-level difficulties, and paraphrasing as being their main challenges in writing a literature review. The doctoral student in Shi's (2007) study also emphasized the same difficulties when writing. Qian and Krugly-Smolska (2008) point out their participants' perception is rooted in the developmental factor, whereas Shi (2007) notes that the marked differences between students' first and second languages cannot be ignored. That is to say, when any students are learning how

to write in a language that is totally different from their first language, they are inclined to focus on vocabulary and grammar.

   Rhetorical organization. The problems that Chinese students encounter with English rhetorical organization have been addressed in older and current research. Kaplan (1966) argues that cultural differences lead to Chinese students' difficulties with Western rhetorical organization at the paragraph level, as Chinese students write using an "indirect" style common in Chinese language. However, Western teachers, for the most part, value "directness" in academic writing discourse. Mohan and Lo (1985) are not in favour of this contrastive approach. They drew on the fact that rhetorical organization was not an important criterion for essay evaluation in the students' previous English essay-writing experiences, and argued that students' problems with rhetorical organization are an outcome of their developmental approach. The significance of the developmental approach is that it takes into account students' previous writing experience, because writing ability is usually gained through practice, especially in formal educational settings.

   Kaplan's (1966) finding is supported by the findings from the interview data of one study in New Zealand (Holmes, 2004) and one in the UK (Edwards et al., 2007), showing that participants tended to value indirectness in writing. Holmes (2004) came to this conclusion by analyzing interview data but provided no further evidence of indirectness, whereas Edwards et al. (2007) used British teachers' feedback as evidence that Chinese students prefer indirectness in writing. Neither study analyzed the participants' writing.

   Rhetorical organization is a complex issue. In Gao's (2012) study of Chinese students' writing experiences, participants maintained that the Western style of directness or linear clarity was valued and taught in both Chinese and English academic writing at Chinese universities.

This teaching of Western-style of direct writing implies an acknowledgement of the cultural differences in rhetorical organization emphasized by Kaplan (1966), and confirms Mohan and Lo's (1985) finding that there should be no marked differences in the organization of Chinese and English academic writing. However, it casts doubt on Mohan and Lo's (1985) developmental approach, because the participants acknowledged having difficulties with rhetorical organization while doing academic writing in the U.S. after they had been trained in China. In Gao's (2012) multiple case and grounded theory approach study, one of the participants reported she forgot to use the strategies she'd been taught previously for her current writing tasks. Thus, one possible explanation may be that the learned Western linear thinking and expression skills may not be internalised and used for English writing projects if students do not have sufficient writing practice. The students' accounts in other studies (e.g., Zhang & Zhou, 2010) support the argument that they had not received sufficient writing training before studying abroad. An undergraduate in this study said, "I did not write any papers in high school" (p. 52).

There is further evidence to support the claim that Chinese students do not practice much writing in China. In the exam-oriented Chinese EFL teaching, essay writing makes up no more than 15% of grades, and a short essay of only 100–150 words is required in higher levels of testing designed for college students, such as the College English Band Six (College English Test Syllabus, 2011).

Subject matter content. Along with problems with vocabulary or sentence-level accuracy and organization, subject matter can also present a writing problem. Gao (2012), in her streamlined qualitative study, investigated graduate students' intercultural experiences with academic writing in English. In this study, the researcher purposely selected three participants with academic writing experience both in English and Chinese, from the disciplines of education

and public administration. The comparison of these students' previous and current writing experiences in Chinese and English led to the conclusion that unfamiliarity with the subject matter of their respective disciplines was a major challenge compared to rhetorical complexity, which was in this case a minor difficulty. In this study, the participants believed it would not be very difficult for them to produce a piece of academic writing if they were familiar with the subject matter and had better knowledge of English academic conventions. However, the evidence used by the researcher to support her conclusion is not very convincing. Instead of using longer papers (e.g., over 2000 words) written in English by her participants' for comparison, she used one participant's short English essays (no more than 150 words) written for high school and another participant's paper (in Chinese) written for an undergraduate degree to support her conclusion. In addition, the sample is too small and covers only the academic disciplines of education and public administration. Thus, difficulty with writing caused by unfamiliarity with the subject matter may exist in this study's context, but it is not widely reported by the participants in other reviewed studies.

Academic writing expectations and conventions. The fact that academic writing expectations and conventions in English often feel alien to Chinese students, combined with their limited knowledge of these conventions and expectations also causes difficulty with performing writing tasks. For example, one participant in a UK study (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006) reported, "I had struggled a lot at my MA, mainly because I was not used to the writing styles here. Things like why and how to use references as evidence" (p. 82). This example suggests that differences in the aim and means of referencing between Chinese and English academic writing may cause confusion. In another study (Zhang & Zhou, 2010), the Chinese participants in a focused group interview recalled that they had never been required to write a paper over 2000 words in English

before, and some had no idea how to use American Psychological Association (APA) style. Similarly, in Holmes' (2004) study, all the participants reported that having to write longer essays was unexpected. All these reported difficulties with English writing conventions and expectations indicate the students have limited knowledge of English academic culture in terms of academic writing.

The expectation of using a Western critical approach in writing proves very difficult for Chinese students to meet, due to various factors (Edwards et al., 2007; Gao, 2012; Qian & Krugly-Smolska, 2008). Qian and Krugly-Smolska (2008) contend this may be due to the Chinese cultural belief that published texts are authoritative and should not be questioned, because their participants reported difficulty in making critiques while writing a literature review. That is to say, Chinese cultural values do not prepare students to adopt a critical approach in academic English writing. However, Gao (2012) cited a study of 45 Japanese undergraduate students by Stapelton (2001, as cited in Gao, 2012), to illustrate the quality of critical writing largely depends on its subject matter rather than on cultural conventions. If students are familiar with writing topics, they are likely to use a critical approach in their writing. In contrast to the culture and content factors, Edwards et al. (2007) cite Chinese students' underdeveloped language proficiency as the main cause of their lack of a critical approach when writing in English. They believe it is less likely for students to write critically if they are unable to read critically and fully understand the content. Their conclusion is strongly supported by the findings of a study (Floyd, 2011) of Chinese students' critical thinking performances in Chinese and English at Macquarie University, Australia. Floyd adopted the Watson Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal both in Chinese and English and compared the results from the two groups (29 and 26 respectively) taking the tests in Chinese or in English. She reported that doing the first half of the

test in Chinese resulted in higher critical thinking scores than in the second half, which was

written in English. Her data from follow-up interviews with the students regarding the difficulty

of the English language version of the test indicate critical thinking is closely correlated with the

language used. Chinese students' difficulty with undertaking a critical approach to writing is a

complex issue, as it involves many dimensions including culture, language, and subject matter.

However, there must be other variables affecting how different individual Chinese students from

different academic disciplines use a critical approach in their English writing, because these

findings are based on samples of a limited number of participants in three studies (in total, 11

participants).

Difficulties with the Different Approaches to Learning and Teaching

Many Chinese students are aware of the differences between Chinese and the Western

approaches to learning and teaching. For example, here is a typical commentary on the

differences between the two as reported in Turner (2006):

> In China, the teachers always tell the students what to do, when to do, how to do,
>
> everything they will tell us! This is big difference. . . . Here in a lecture, when sometime
>
> the lecturer tell something, something, then we are divided into group and we discuss in
>
> the groups. But in university in China, the whole lecture is the teacher saying. (p. 37)

Similarly, the participants in Wong (2004), at first felt lost when they did not have teachers to

"spoon-feed them like before" (p. 160), and they realized that the emphasis on group work as

experienced at an Australian university was something they were not familiar with. Unfamiliarity with new approaches to learning and teaching may result in a number of difficulties. Students' difficulties with becoming independent tertiary students as expected in the West and their difficulties with participating in group work are discussed respectively in the following subsections.

Difficulties in becoming an independent tertiary student. In the literature there is ample research regarding Chinese students as learners in a Chinese learning context. Turner (2006) drew a portrait of a model Chinese tertiary student after reviewing the literature of Chinese students in Chinese teaching and learning contexts in both the pre-Socialist tradition and in the contemporary environment. Turner also created an image of a model British tertiary student, a representative from Western English academia, based on the progressive models of students in the higher education in the UK. The comparison of the model Chinese and British students suggests a gap in orientation to learning. According to Turner (2006), two important differences can be seen. The first difference is the locus of control over learning. This, according to Bown (2006), is "a construct that describes learners' beliefs about roles and responsibility in learning" (p. 641). The model Chinese student may not select assignment topics on his own or carry out research without clear direction from teachers, as he believes it is the teacher's responsibility to decide what he should learn, whereas a Western model student may independently manage his own learning to meet the teacher's suggestions. Second, the typical Chinese student merely seeks to *reproduce* culture—i.e., does not question, follows defined rules, is passive/receptive, reads/listens—whereas the typical Western student *produces* culture—i.e., receives knowledge critically, meets received knowledge with an independent mind, asks

questions. In summary, the model Western student is an independent tertiary student, while the model Chinese student is a dependent learner.

These two differences imply potential difficulties Chinese students may face once they transfer to an English learning culture. However, it is well believed that students will come to approach their learning differently in a novel learning environment (Bowden & Marton, 1998). For the remainder of this section, students' difficulties with becoming independent tertiary students are discussed, based on two important differences inferred from Turner (2006): locus of control over learning and Western critical thinking in learning.

Locus of control over learning*.* As an independent tertiary student, students should not only set learning goals, choose materials, and evaluate their progress, but they should also critically evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses and solve problems independently (Warring, 2010). Students should be responsible for their own learning.

It is difficult for Chinese students to take full responsibility over their learning. Turner (2006) studied a group of nine students in a one-year postgraduate degree program in the UK. Her results suggest the participants' underlying approach to learning did not change significantly over the year. The students still believed that their success in learning was the teacher's responsibility. This sentiment is reflected in a quoted Chinese saying: "There is no bad student, just a bad teacher" (p. 40). Thus, the students' previously held belief impeded them from using an independent learning approach.

Turner's (2006) conclusion is echoed by the finding of Warring (2010) that it may take a long time for students to adopt the belief that they hold a greater responsibility for their own learning than do their teachers. Warring measured the independence levels of a cohort of 27 Chinese students in a New Zealand university at three points during their bachelor's degree

program in business. By analysing data from questionnaires and interviews the researcher found that at the beginning of the program, the students believed teachers were more responsible for "selecting parts of text to read, finding readings for an assignment, giving examples" (p. 385) and at the end of the program, they still believed "giving examples" was the teacher's responsibility. The findings from Turner (2006) and Warring (2010) suggest Chinese students need sufficient time to shift from the previous belief that teachers should be responsible for students' learning to the belief that students should take charge of their own learning. While Turner points out the implicit nature of the British culture of learning also resulted in the students' less substantive adoption of a Western approach to learning, Warring suggests there may be some other variables affecting the development of independence in learning; for example, students' motivation for learning.

The contradictory research results suggest Chinese students embrace a Western independent learning style, in spite of initial difficulties and frustrations, and that they are adaptive learners (Biggs, 1996; Volet & Renshaw, 1996; as cited in Wong, 2004). For example, Wong (2004) found that Chinese students preferred the Australian do-it-yourself learning style to the Chinese spoon-fed style. In another study (Skyrme, 2007), participants enjoyed do-it-yourself learning in New Zealand. These findings indicate that students show a lot of willingness to make changes in their learning style. This willingness indicates students may have taken responsibility for their learning. Wong (2004) even concludes that participants adapted "within two or three months" (p. 165). This contradicts Turner (2006) and Warring's (2010) conclusions that it takes a longer amount of time for students to adapt. Compared to the measurement of students' independence levels used in Warring (2010), Wong's participants' levels of adaptation was simply measured by their accounts, such as "feeling OK" (p. 164) or "getting better" (p. 165).

Therefore, more research is needed to identify whether Chinese students can develop independent-learning style beliefs about their roles and responsibilities in a short period of time.

The evidence from Skyrme's (2007) study supports that it is not easy for Chinese students to become independent learners in spite of their willingness. Two of the participants in this study made great efforts. However, they still struggled at the end of their first year. For example, one of the participants failed his course and could not understand why. He said, "You know, I go to every workshop and I go to every lecture and I take marvellous notes, and before the tests I used one week to review" (p. 364). The student's reports indicate that he did not fully understand the concept of independence in learning. First, he understood independent learning to mean that students should study independently with no detailed instructions or direct supervision from teachers and parents, as they experienced in China. Second, this student failed to understand that an independent learner is responsible for seeking help if needed, or evaluating his own strengths and weaknesses in order to adjust his learning strategies. This example suggests it is important to be clear about what an independent learner and his or her responsibilities consist of.

In another study (Guo & O'Sullivan, 2012), Chinese graduate students' firm belief that teachers are classroom authorities prevented them from treating teachers in their Western classroom as learning partners who do not shoulder as much responsibility as their Chinese teachers did. Based on the analysis of data collected from their study of the learning experiences of 18 Chinese graduate students enrolled with international cohorts at Brock University, the researchers contend there is an urgent need for Chinese students to accept teachers as learning partners in the Western sense, which is a necessary step in order for students to switch from depending heavily on teachers, to developing full responsibility for their own learning.

The findings from Turner (2006), Skyrme (2007), and Warring (2010) do not support Wong's (2004) claim that students' can take full responsibility for their learning in a short time. While Turner (2006) suggests more time and support are necessary for students to develop a new belief and adopt a new approach, Skyrme (2007) believes that students should better prepare themselves before their programs begin. However, all four studies note that a learner's belief in her own responsibility for learning affects adaptation.

Western critical thinking in learning. In addition to not believing they should take responsibility for their learning, a lack of understanding about Western critical thinking and the critical pedagogy required for independent learning also hinders Chinese students from becoming independent learners. Critical thinking is the objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgement (Critical thinking, 2017). It is fundamentally valued in the Western academic tradition and culture, but was absent in Chinese educational traditions until the beginning of the 21st century, when great educational changes took place in China at both grade school and post-secondary levels (Guo & O'Sullivan, 2012). As a critical approach to learning is required both in oral and written learning, some discussions on critical thinking have overlap with related issues in the language section.

Unfamiliarity with the concept of critical thinking inhibited students from initially adopting Western critical thinking and pedagogy. For example, some participants in Guo and O'Sullivan (2012) thought that "critical thinking meant taking the opposite position to the one taken in the article" (p. 170). Similarly, in Qian and Krugly-Smolsak (2008), the participants were unwilling to critique the practices in the research they studied because they considered *critique* to mean, "say bad things about others' work" (p. 75). These findings may reflect an inaccurate understanding of English terms resulting from insufficient language abilities. Also,

they highlight the difficulties caused by the absence of such educational values in students' previous learning contexts.

Guo and O'Sullivan (2012) also found that traditional Chinese values, such as the belief that teachers are classroom authorities and a harmony-oriented communication style added to the difficulties students had with developing an understanding of Western critical thinking and pedagogy and acquiring the relevant skills. Durkin's (2008a) research confirms the difficulties students have in the process of adopting Western critical thinking. Her research results suggest that, due to their cultural inheritance, Chinese students may choose not to adopt a Western critical thinking style.

Based on the data from interviews with 29 Chinese students, 12 lecturers from the UK, and six students from the UK, Durkin (2008a) depicts Chinese students' assimilation as a five-stage journey in terms of adopting Western norms of critical thinking and argumentation. The five stages include: (a) becoming familiar with new required skills; (b) feeling reluctant to adopt the skills demonstrated by teachers and Western students; (c) being engaged and feeling more confident; (d) automatically questioning and reflecting on accessed information; and (e) gaining expertise and being a self-directed learner. The researcher notes that, though the journey is represented linearly, there may be some overlap or back-and-forth between stages. The surprising finding of the study is that none of the participants moved closer to fully adopting Western critical thinking and argumentation styles. The researcher argues that the Chinese students chose not to, because Western-style critical thinking contradicts Chinese cultural values and Chinese students sometimes see Western critique as "insensitive and unnecessary offensive" (p. 23). Therefore, the students adopted a neutral style, termed by Durkin (2008b) as the *middle way*, "which synergizes eastern and western approaches to academic critique" (p. 23).

Both Durkin (2008a) and Guo and O'Sullivan (2012) acknowledge cultural differences can be a major factor affecting the acquisition of critical thinking skills. However, the latter study notes that insufficient English language proficiency and unfamiliarity with the notions of Western critical thinking and pedagogy are also contributory factors, whereas the former study mainly explores the issue within cultural schemata. This may be due to their different research constructs. However, the differences in the identities of participants and the roles of the authors in these two studies may also help explain their differing conclusions. In Durkin's study all the participants were volunteers, while in Guo and O'Sullivan's, a Chinese graduate cohort were chosen and the researchers had a significant amount of contact with the participants in an academic setting due to O'Sullivan being their instructor.

Difficulties with participating in group work. In the literature under review, *group work* is not a consistently used term. It generally refers to the completion of academic tasks in groups in and out of class. In some studies, it mainly refers to *group discussions* (e.g., Y. Wang, 2012; Xue, 2013). In some studies it refers to *group projects,* or *group assignments* (e.g., Gram, Jaeger, Liu, Qing, & Wu, 2013). It may refer to both (e.g., Holmes, 2008; Li & Campbell, 2008; Zhang & Zhou; 2010). These terms tend to be used synonymously, though *group project or assignments* is often regarded as *group work* for grades. As oral communication between group members is essential for group work, difficulties with group work include difficulties with group discussions. Thus, difficulties with group discussions may overlap with difficulties encountered in oral classroom communication. Communication or discussions with student peers is the main focus of the rest of this section.

In addition to language deficiency (not the focus of this section), there are two major factors affecting Chinese students' active participation in group work discussed in the literature: pedagogical factors and cultural factors.

Pedagogical factors. Lecturing is still the dominant mode of teaching used by Chinese teachers, although adopting group work as an alternative teaching and learning approach has occasionally been practiced in some Chinese schools and universities. Group work in the Chinese classroom has not yet been successful, because Chinese teachers lack a deep understanding of group work and have insufficient teaching strategies for implementing group work in class, while Chinese students also lack knowledge about group work, such as awareness of cooperation and the skills and motivation required for group work (Han, 2009).Therefore, it can be inferred that unfamiliarity or an unsatisfactory experience with group work in previous educational settings may cause students to form negative perceptions of group work which consequently affect their attitudes and participation.

Some researchers contend that Chinese students do not show much enthusiasm for group work (Turner, 2006; Wong, 2004; Xue, 2013) when initially exposed to English-speaking learning environments due to their limited prior knowledge of and skills for group work. For example, the participants in Wong's (2004) study reported having difficulty with cooperative group work and stated their preference for individual work, while most participants in Turner (2006) and Xue (2013) found group work to be a waste of time, did not learn much in group-work settings, or had other unpleasant experiences with group work. It seems that researchers only discussed group work as a teaching approach opposite to lecturing, and contend students' unfamiliarity with the approach renders negative attitudes. However, unfamiliarity may also give rise to curiosity and enthusiasm. In a study conducted with Chinese students in English-speaking

programs at a Danish university, Chinese students did not show any negative attitudes toward problem-solving projects (Gram et al., 2013). According to Gram et al., the participants initially encountered the same confusion and frustration as reported in other studies, but their "curiosity, enthusiasm, and perseverance" (p. 770) helped them to complete and actively engage in group work. Gram et al. note their participants valued group work because of a pragmatic reason: assessment. That is to say, once they realized evaluation and grading was based on group rather than individual performances, Chinese students had to accept different academic standards and values if they hoped to succeed academically. This finding is a good complimentary explanation as to why there was a change in students' attitudes, though there must have been other variables affecting the process of change.

Practice and active participation in group work may help students to develop a positive attitude, and will therefore promote group work participation. In Wong's (2004) study, participants complied with the rules of group work and made efforts to adapt due to some pragmatic reasons, like the desire for academic success, which is echoed by the finding from Gram et al. (2013). After some practice, students adapted quickly. In Xue (2013), a change in attitude was seen after half a year to one year, once students understood the significance of group work and recognized its benefits. These findings suggest participating in group work is a crucial step in adapting to the Western approach to learning and teaching. Through participation, students can develop knowledge and acquire essential skills for the activity.

Moreover, contact with domestic students and other international students while doing group work leads to better adaptation. Both Wong (2004) and Xue (2013)'s participants worked mainly with local students. Gram et al. (2013)'s participants had more contact with domestic and international peers while working on projects together. The same is true of the participants in a

study (Y. Wang, 2012) of the group-work experiences of eight transfer students from a Chinese university to a UK university, completing their fourth year of a UK bachelor's degree in business. These research findings indicate students' initial negative attitudes toward group work may remain if they do not spend enough time participating in group work with domestic and other international peers.

However, not all students have sufficient opportunity to work in diverse cultural groups. For example, Turner's (2006) participants lacked such opportunities because they were enrolled in a Chinese cohort program. The participants in Zhang and Zhou (2010) reported their local peers, "have their group, and it's really hard to get into it" (p. 54). These students' negative experiences with group assignments in the English learning context may lead them to maintain their negative attitudes, resulting in passive participation. For example, the participants in an investigation (Li & Campbell, 2008) of students' group-work learning experiences in a New Zealand learning context reported that domestic students avoided working with Chinese students, assuming their insufficient language skills might negatively affect group-work performance; thus, the Chinese students were forced to work with members of their culture. Sometimes these groups consisted of all Chinese or 80% to 90% Chinese students. Therefore, restricting Chinese students from having contact with domestic and other international students through group work results in their less active participation in group work. However, it should not be ignored that learners' autonomy also plays an important role in academic adaptation. If learners hold the belief that it is their responsibility to get involved in group work, they will attempt to overcome potential difficulties.

Li and Campbell (2008) suggest Chinese students have mixed feelings towards group work. In their study, Asian undergraduate students (15 Chinese out of 22 participants) reported

that they valued group discussions but felt frustrated when completing group assignments that were assessed based on the performance of the whole group. This study differs from other studies—which used "group work," "group discussion," and "group assignments" synonymously— in its distinction of types of group work. Regarding the reason for mixed feelings, Li and Campbell (2008) contend that Chinese students like group discussions in the classroom because they see them as being helpful in improving their English proficiency and communication skills, and in developing friendship with peers. In other words, students may see social or personal values in group discussions, whereas their dislike of group assignments suggests their failure to recognize the educational value in group work, such as gaining better understanding through discussion and explanation or pooling knowledge and skills. For example, many students in the reviewed studies (e.g., Turner, 2006; Xue, 2013) revealed that they did not like group work because they did not regard peers as reliable sources of knowledge. It should be noted that a recognition of the educational value of group work may encourage students to put more time and effort into group work practice. That is to say, if students have ample prior experience with group work, they would more easily adapt to it. For example, the participants in Y. Wang (2012) practised group work at their Chinese university because their program was jointly run by the Chinese and the British university. When transferred to study in the UK, they did not display any of the negative attitudes reported in other studies.

To sum up, difficulties caused by pedagogical factors seem not to last permanently. Students may adapt to group work sooner if provided sufficient time and opportunity to practice in culturally diverse groups.

Cultural factors. Cultural factors affect Chinese students' participation in culturally diverse group work (Gram et al., 2013; Holmes, 2008; Y. Wang, 2012; Zhang & Zhou, 2010).

While, Zhang and Zhou (2010) suggest language deficiencies and differences between Chinese culture and Canadian culture contribute to Chinese students' difficulty with group work, they do not provide detailed information on what specific differences are the contributing factors. Other researchers either explore which Chinese cultural inheritances cause difficulties, or which cultural aspects of host countries cause difficulties with participating in group work.

Y. Wang (2012) conducts a longitudinal study of six Chinese transfer students at a UK university. The analysis of data from 24 in-depth interviews during one academic year blames Chinese cultural inheritances for the students' initial lack of participation of group work, though this study identifies active participation in group work may greatly promote students' academic adaptation. These Chinese cultural inheritances include: (a) keeping a low profile, (b) thinking thrice before acting, (c) *saving face*, and (d) spoken voice being equated with knowledge and experience. According to this researcher's interpretation, in Chinese tradition people believe that "a tall tree catches the wind" (p. 531) and this belief convinced the participants that they, as newcomers, should maintain a low profile by listening more and speaking less. Otherwise, they felt they would be disliked or regarded as *show-offs*. Second, thinking thrice before acting is much valued in Chinese culture, and this made the participants reluctant to give spontaneous verbal response. Third, *face saving or maintaining* for themselves and others made it challenging for the participants to question other group members' ideas or aggressively defend their own ideas. Fourth, in Chinese formal learning settings, spoken voice is equated with authority or expertise. As the students tended to consider the group members with higher English language proficiency and more knowledge of the target culture as authorities or experts, they held back from expressing their own ideas and were inclined to follow those "authorities."

Some of Wang's findings echo conclusions of a study (Holmes, 2008) in a New Zealand learning context. Holmes investigated 14 Chinese students' experiences with group work. Data drawn from her in-depth interviews confirm that cultural differences, especially Chinese cultural inheritances, cause difficulties. Her research suggests Chinese students place *harmony* in interpersonal relations as the most important element of their group work interactions. In order to achieve *harmony*, Chinese students try to *give, preserve, or save face* by limiting or avoiding verbal responses. *Face* or *mianzi* in Chinese is a sociological concept original to Chinese culture and salient in Chinese communication. It is "an image of self, possessed by a person through their interest in how they are regarded or judged by others, and face is a social representation of a person reflecting the respect, regard or confidence others have in them" (Qi, 2011, p. 287). To put it simply, *face* in Chinese culture means avoiding embarrassment or conflicts in communication in order to maintain one's own and others' faces. Thus, keeping silent or limiting verbal participation in group work is a strategy in avoiding potential embarrassment or conflict. Both Holmes (2008) and Y. Wang (2012) identify the negative effects of *face* on Chinese students' group work participation. Holmes also reports Chinese students were shocked by the manner of communication by their New Zealand peers, and that the Chinese inclination toward *harmony* was unrecognized by New Zealand students. Whereas Y. Wang focuses on students' reflections on the influences of Chinese inheritances, Holmes contends that both cultural differences and Chinese inheritances influence Chinese students' inactive participation in group work.

Chinese students may put more energy into maintaining harmonious relationships to meet their emotional needs than into successful completion of the task at hand. In other words, they value relationships between team members more than work completion (Durkin, 2008b).

However, they may not realize that silence can be interpreted negatively in Western learning settings. For example, the New Zealand students in Holmes (2008) found their Chinese peers to be reluctant to express their opinions and to have weak language skills.

Another empirical study of Chinese students' group work needs (Cox, Chiles, & Care, 2012) confirms the finding that Chinese students have more emotional concerns than their British peers while communicating together in group work. Data for this study were gathered through a creative visual method. The participants were given 45 minutes to design a model for organizing culturally diverse group work effectively using a cupboard framework, knives, and coloured paper and pens. They were then asked to give oral explanations of their designs as well as a written reflection upon completion of the model. As previous research has confirmed that students' affective responses to their learning space could reflect their mental and emotional condition (in terms of enthusiasm, confidence, loyalty) in learning (Burke & Grovesnor, 2003; Clark, 2010; Douglas & Gifford, 2001; as cited in Cox et al., 2012), the researchers of this study compared the ten models created by six Chinese students and four British students and the students' verbal descriptions and written reflections on their models. Their data analysis indicates that the Chinese students showed more concern over the emotions (anxiety and distraction) present during group work, whereas the domestic UK students focused more on the task itself. Though this study did not directly examine Chinese students' difficulties with group work per se, the results indicate nonetheless that maintaining *harmony* between group members may consume Chinese students' energy and negatively affect their verbal participation.

Both Holmes (2008) and Cox et al. (2012) included domestic participants in their studies. This provides a more complete picture of the Chinese students' experiences with group work than does Y. Wang's (2012) study. However, all studies' sample sizes were too small to

definitively assess the effects of cultural inheritances. As newcomers, it is understandable that Chinese students would put more energy into maintaining good relations with locals in order to adapt to their new environment. Thus, it can be inferred that once Chinese students feel settled and become familiar with learning activities, they may focus more on the work itself while doing group work.

To sum up, the differences between host cultures and Chinese culture cause difficulties with group work participation. However, it seems researchers focus more on the negative effects of Chinese cultural inheritances.

Conclusion

This review articulates some problems Chinese students encounter during academic adaptation to English learning environments. In terms of language, difficulties related to oral classroom communication include: (a) speed and accent, (b) vocabulary deficiency, and (c) limited verbal participation. Lack of practising aural and oral English in previous EFL classrooms and lack of confidence in using the language is common. Difficulties with reading in English suggest Chinese students read academic materials slowly and lack the required reading strategies to deal with academic English. Regarding difficulties with academic writing, Chinese students report limited vocabulary and concerns over sentence-level accuracy as contributing factors. Furthermore, unfamiliarity with content, English writing conventions and expectations, and difficulty with rhetorical organization cause problems with writing tasks. The causes of these difficulties mainly result from insufficient writing practice prior entering the Western learning environment.

In terms of dealing with different approaches to learning and teaching, Chinese students' difficulties in becoming an independent tertiary student mainly reside in their belief that teachers are responsible for students' learning. While adapting to group work, pedagogical factors as well as cultural factors result in their inappropriate attitudes and limited participation. Certain Chinese cultural inheritances have been identified as contributing factors.

As these problems and likely causes during academic adaptation were gleaned from small-scale qualitative studies, they may not be very representative of the large population of Chinese students abroad. However, the categorized specific difficulties gleaned from these studies may provide more insight into adaptation issues and suggest implications for educators and international students that can help students transition smoothly and experience success in an English and Western context.

Implications

In this section, I summarize practical implications drawn from the findings of my review and my own experience as an international student and a long-time EFL teacher. Implications are discussed in four sections: (a) building up language skills for oral communication, (b) enhancing academic literacy (academic reading and writing), (c) adapting to Western-style independent learning, and (d) adapting to group work. As the research results from Skyrme (2007), Y. Wang (2012), and Xue (2013) all note the importance of students' preparations and support from host institutions in terms of language knowledge of the English language and target academic culture, I will discuss both pre-departure and post-arrival preparations and support in the following sections.

Building up Language Skills for Oral Communication

Before departure. In some studies (e.g., Shi, 2007; Wan, 2001; Xue, 2013) Chinese students attributed the cause of their inadequate listening and speaking skills to the grammar-translation-focused English instruction they received prior to attending English-speaking institutions. Though some changes favouring the development of aural and oral skills have been seen in EFL instruction both at school and university levels (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006), grammar-translation instruction is still the dominant approach in China. In spite of some pragmatic problems, such as class size, class time, mandatory textbooks, and assessment systems, there is still room for EFL teachers to implement changes in order to improve their students' aural and oral skills. My experience working as a secondary-school EFL teacher prompts me to suggest

introducing learning resources that will facilitate independence in language learning to students as a way to enable motivated students to devote more of their spare time and energy into developing their aural and oral skills for general conversational communication.

In 1998, I taught Grade 7 in China and many of my students were highly motivated to improve their English oral communication skills because they planned to study abroad after obtaining their degrees in China. To meet my students' needs, I provided them with *Family Album, U. S. A.*, a popular television course for teaching American English in China, to make up for the limited audio materials in their school textbooks (which only exposed them to a British accent). The whole series includes 26 episodes with a storyline that narrates the life of a family in New York. Each episode, consisting of three acts, lasts around 20 minutes and includes educational practice materials. At first, I simply played the video in class for my students to watch for six minutes (one act) during a 40-minute class period. After I noticed many students became interested and wanted to discuss the program with classmates, I began to invite my students to hold discussions in groups of four to respond to the questions raised in the program. Thus, an opportunity to speak in English was provided, though it did not last long (several minutes). As the students' interest in spoken English grew, I encouraged them to imitate the conversations in the video first and then make up their own plots in their spare time. The students were encouraged to act out their plots in class. This teaching practice brought about significant improvement in the students' listening and speaking abilities, and after one term of training, many of my students could confidently communicate in English with a group of high school Japanese students visiting our school.

This television course was ideal for my students in terms of length and content. First, each episode did not take up much of the class time that was allotted for teaching the school

textbooks. Second, the educational practice material summarized in each episode covered many aspects, including formulaic expressions, idioms, and American cultural knowledge that were rarely delineated in the textbooks we used. Further, the content aiming to develop general conversational skills proved very helpful in building up students' confidence in using English as they were exposed to a variety of speech speeds and American accents.

The literature review found that Chinese students have concerns about speed, accent, and vocabulary, which implies a need for more exposure and practice. However, English-learning time in school or university classrooms is limited to two hours per week on average. Therefore, in order to learn effectively, students must spend time outside of school practising English. This could be done through classes at language training centres or by studying on their own. Students could easily access authentic English learning materials pertaining to their interests or areas of specialty online. For example, a Web 2.0 resource site allows users to interact and collaborate with each other using social media. By listening to talks and lectures or interacting with other English users, students can become accustomed to different speech speeds and accents, and learn new words.

New technologies and the Internet also empower EFL teachers to help students improve their aural and oral English abilities. Several years ago, when I taught Grade 11 in China, I encouraged my students to watch TED Talks (ed.ted.com) in order to improve their English listening and speaking skills. Many of the talks are very interesting, and most have written transcripts that can help learners with comprehension. I played a TED Talk called iPod Magician, by Marco Tempest in class. This video aroused the students' interest in watching more TED Talks. Therefore, I created a group chat on Wechat (a mobile text and voice messaging communication service), where students were encouraged to share the TED episodes they found

interesting, and to make verbal or written comments in English. Many students in the class participated in this activity, and seemed to enjoy sharing episodes and commenting verbally. This is an example of how students can learn on their own, outside of the classroom, to enhance their listening and speaking proficiency under their teachers' guidance.

Conversation Exchange (http://www.conversationexchange.com/) is a language exchange website I have used, and I recommend it to students who want more real-time verbal communication with English users. Students simply go to the home page of the website and sign up for an account. After logging in, students can follow step-by-step instructions to search for potential language partners. They are likely to find native English speakers learning Chinese. Students can then choose to either meet in person with conversation partners who live nearby, or to converse online via Skype or other applications. Speaking with English users from many different cultures, whether online or face to face, can also familiarize students with various speaking speeds and accents, and give them real-time interactive use of English, which will greatly benefit their future study abroad.

The implications above are mainly about building up general conversational knowledge and skills, and increasing exposure to and practice with English conversation. In terms of improving the language skills needed in academic settings, a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) can be ideal. MOOCs provide not only traditional course materials, such as filmed lectures, readings, and problem sets, but also interactive user forums to support interactions among students. The more students take advantage of these types of interactive learning activities, the more likely it is for them to shed their tendency to learn English receptively—an issue raised by Ranta and Mechelborg (2013). There are sites at elite universities (e.g., https://www.coursera.org/) where students can choose from a large number of courses to study

free of charge. For example, a course called Academic Discussions in English (https://www.coursera.org/learn/academic-discussion-english) from the University of California, Irvine (UCI), introduces different types of conversation in academic settings and teaches strategies for understanding meaning and expressing oneself effectively. Successful completion of online courses can earn participants a certificate with official recognition from universities, which can be motivational.

My own experience with MOOCs leads me to believe these resources can be very helpful. The first online MOOC course I registered for was on Child Nutrition and Cooking from Stanford University. I attended classes by watching videos, took quizzes, and wrote assignments on a weekly basis. It was like taking a class in a traditional classroom, but there were several advantages to this method of learning. When I was confused during the lecture, I could stop the video and replay the confusing section until I made sense of it, and such repetition made it easier to memorize the subject-specific vocabulary (e.g., carbohydrates or metabolism). Furthermore, participating in discussions through web-based seminars eased my fears of making mistakes, as no one was watching me as I spoke. This interactive learning activity enhanced my ability to verbally and spontaneously respond to other webinar members.

After arrival. It is highly recommended that Chinese students increase their intercultural interactions with people who have higher spoken language proficiency in and outside classrooms. Ranta and Meckelborg (2013) point out that Chinese students tend to learn English in a receptive manner, whereas interactive activities, such as group discussions, have been proven to be more effective in improving English communicative competence (Xue, 2013). Therefore, students should take full advantage of group discussions in class to enhance their listening and speaking skills. After class, communication with people from the same academic communities can also be

helpful. For example, many from my cohort from China and other countries attended the Conversation Partners Program provided at UVic. By speaking with English native speakers or other students with high levels of English proficiency for a minimum of one hour per week throughout the term, these students felt that both their listening and conversational skills greatly improved, as well as their cultural competence and knowledge.

Host institutions and instructors can also make a difference. Above all, it is vital that instructors are aware of what their Chinese (and other international) students might struggle with. For example, the University of Victoria (UVic) has suggestions posted for faculty members and support staff (http://web.uvic.ca/~sherriw/adjustment.htm). Instructors are advised to slow down and/or provide written notes or reading materials in advance in order to help students cope with their speed of speech. It is suggested teachers use plain English rather than idioms, and limit the use of examples based on one specific culture to explain concepts. Teachers should take into consideration their students' educational and cultural backgrounds before asking questions or suggesting a topic for discussion. In addition, before-class preparation can help students to perform in spontaneous in-class discussions. For example, when one of our cohort's teachers recognized that we had low levels of confidence and proficiency in spoken English, she started an online forum where we were required to post our questions, opinions, and comments on certain issues ahead of the class. When in class, she chose one or two of the most commented-on postings as topics for in-class discussions. As a result, we actively participated in class discussions.

Outside of the classroom, support services similar to the Conversation Partners Program or mentoring culture at UVic can be an effective way to encourage intercultural interaction and communication. However, to cope with difficulties with classroom communication, more

effective support services should be implemented at the departmental level. For example, in a study cited by Shi (2007), English tutors with a business background who were assigned to help Chinese MBA participants prepared them for oral presentations in class and improved their overall oral proficiency.

Enhancing Academic Literacy

Before departure. Many Chinese students did not have sufficient opportunity to practise reading academic materials or to write longer academic papers in Chinese EFL classrooms. For example, one of the participants in Zhang and Zhou's (2010) study reported she had never written an essay over 2,000 words and had no knowledge of APA style. The participants also complained of heavy reading loads (Holmes, 2004; Shi, 2007). In order to prepare themselves to study at English-speaking universities, students can enrol in online courses provided by their future university or English-speaking universities prior to their departure. For example, on Coursera (https://www.coursera.org/) students can find free online classes from over a hundred top universities and educational organizations. They can choose courses in their own subject areas or English courses that focus on improving students' competency in academic reading and writing. A course called Academic Writing, from the UCI, requires students to complete a 7-8 page long research paper in addition to performing course readings and small assignments. By enrolling in such courses, students have more exposure to academic reading and writing tasks.

Successful completion of these courses not only helps students learn more about their chosen subject in English, but also teaches them about academic writing conventions and expectations. Such preparation helps students to develop their linguistic knowledge, critical

approaches to academic reading and writing, and academic literacy skills prior to entering an English learning context. For students without access to these online resources, reading academic articles in English books or journals in libraries could be useful. However, it would be difficult to improve academic writing skills without the teaching and feedback provided in classroom instruction or online courses.

After arrival. To overcome difficulties with academic reading and writing, students should seek help in developing the required study skills after arrival in addition to practising writing on their own. Attending language preparation programs provided by the host university would be helpful. An example of this is the University Admission Preparation (UAP) provided by the English Learning Center at UVic. Students enhance their academic literacy by attending intensive UAP classes that focus on teaching academic English and the comprehensive language skills required for academic studies. Such courses can be expensive, however, increasing the financial burden on students, and they may not cover all aspects of writing required in students' specialized subject areas. Therefore, alternative language support within disciplines or some content-based ESL courses may be a better solution. According to Kaspar (1997; as cited in Andrade, 2006), students who attended a content-based reading/writing ESL course scored better on a writing test than those in the control group.

A series of workshops on enhancing academic literacy is usually provided by host universities. Students should take advantage of these workshops. One-on-one appointments with support specialists at some universities are also available. For example, the Center for Academic Communication (CAC) at UVic (http://www.uvic.ca/learningandteaching/home/home/centre/services/index.php) attempts to help students understand expectations for assignments, essay structure, sentence-level clarity, argument, critical reading skills, and so on. Unfortunately,

not all Chinese students take advantage of the support services offered by their universities. For instance, none of the engineering students in Qian and Krugly-Smolska's (2008) study went to the Language Centre for help with their writing difficulties, because their friends found the ESL specialists to be unhelpful. It is true that general ESL specialists may not be well-versed in the subject matter of an engineering paper. However, it is unwise of students to refuse to seek available help. In contrast to these engineering students, all the participants in Gao's (2012) study reported that they benefited from using their university's language support service and that their writing was much improved in terms of vocabulary, syntax, and structure. Therefore, while language support centres can help international students to improve their writing skills, subject-area advisers assigned at the department level would make a big difference. For example, these speciality-area advisers could host *open sessions* or a weekly hour-long round table for international students and other students to talk about their current work in their areas of speciality.

Students can receive one-on-one help from instructors or supervisors during office hours or emailing instructors for advice regarding difficulties and concerns. Many Chinese students reported that they relied on help from their supervisors (Gao, 2012; Qian & Krugly-Smolska, 2008; Shi, 2007). There is no doubt that supervisors or course instructors are the best source of help, because they can give all-round support, such as help with writing content, the structure of academic papers, and meeting expectations. The effectiveness of peer help was also reported. The participants stated their writing competence improved during group assignments because their peers, with higher levels of writing proficiency, provided valuable feedback (Gram et al., 2013, Xue, 2013). Therefore, while learning to adhere to academic writing conventions, Chinese

students should practise and seek feedback from all available sources, because revising work based on such feedback will improve their writing.

Many host teachers realize the importance of giving explicit explanations on writing expectations and conventions to Chinese students. However, students may need some time before they're capable of meeting expectations. Students should apply their newly acquired writing knowledge while practicing, with guidance, during their transition period. Students should be reflective during practice and avoid transferring reading or writing conventions learned from writing in their first language into their writing in English. For example, when I began the literature review for this project, I read a number of journal articles and book chapters related to my topic, as I hold a firm belief that reading makes a good writer. While reading, I copied phrases or sentences from the papers. When I sat down to write my paper, I began by paraphrasing sentences from my notes. I was unaware of any problems with my writing until my supervisor pointed out that I was retelling, not critically analyzing or evaluating, the literature.

It can be very helpful for teachers to provide students with samples of both good and poor writing at the beginning of their program. For example, the IELTS test designers published some past IELTS test papers with answers. In the answer sections, writing samples of different Band scores are provided. By comparing and analyzing these samples, candidates can better understand the criteria for a good essay. Likewise, if host teachers provided sample assignments, students could better understand the requirements for their writing assignments.

Adapting to Western Independent Learning

As is indicated in the literature, coming from a teacher-dependent learning culture, many Chinese students encounter difficulties in becoming independent learners in Western institutions. Chinese students should take the initiative to overcome potential challenges. In addition, a facilitative learning environment is required to assist these students in becoming independent learners.

What Chinese students need to do. In the initial stages, Chinese students should have a clear notion of the roles of students and teachers in a Western higher education context, i.e., that tertiary students are expected to be independent learners and teachers are seen as learning partners (Guo & O'Sullivan, 2012). As learning partners, teachers are mainly responsible for providing a supportive and facilitative learning environment. Therefore, students should understand that they themselves, rather than their teachers, are responsible for their own learning in a Western learning context.

In practice, it is very difficult for students to let go of their belief that teachers are responsible for students' learning. During my first term at UVic, some teachers assigned readings and others did not. My Chinese cohort and I agreed that the teachers who *gave* reading assignments were more *responsible*. This example illustrates that, even at the graduate level, Chinese students can still be dependent on teachers to guide their reading. We also made judgements based on our previously held values and beliefs. This demonstrates that we did not yet realize our roles as independent tertiary students. Therefore, it would be helpful for students to reflect on their learning experiences and refresh their understanding of what independent learning means in their new learning environment.

Any misconceptions about what this entails may delay the development of independence in learning. Wong (2004) suggests that students can begin the independent learning process by

asking questions when they have problems. However, not all students are clear about the importance of asking questions in Western critical pedagogy. For example, when my course instructors assigned journal articles to read, I would only *read* them, without taking notes, making comments, or raising questions. Thus, I seldom brought any questions to class for discussion, even though I may have been confused by parts of the reading. I felt reluctant to ask as I was afraid of losing face if I asked questions that seemed stupid. Instead of inquiring for answers myself, I always waited for a summary or conclusion from the teacher to gauge whether I had understood the articles. This demonstrates that I did not fully understand what makes an independent learner, as I did not show sufficient accountability and critical thinking in my learning. Therefore, it would be helpful for students to take a quiz to see whether or not they are an independent learner before they begin school in the West. Some quizzes like this can be found on university websites (for example, http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/llonline/study/your-learning-goals/1.xml). Taking such quizzes may help students see to what extent they are independent learners, and they can begin working towards becoming more independent.

The term *critical thinking* is also crucial for understanding independent learning. Chinese students may hold a misconception of what critical thinking means. I used to equate the word *critical* with the word *criticize*, and thus focused on that definition of *critical*: expressing adverse or disapproving comments. In doing so, I misunderstood that, in a Western-learning context, it also means expressing an analysis of merits and faults. I assumed that critical thinking in Western classrooms meant giving negative or opposite comments. I was surprised to learn that I was not the only one who had this misunderstanding, as Guo and O'Sullivan (2012) found this misconception to be common among the Chinese participants in their study. Again, many online resources are available for students to learn more about Western critical thinking; for example,

on the Critical Thinking Web (http://philosophy.hku.hk/think/critical/ct.php), tutorials are provided to teach students about critical thinking.

Along with understanding the key features of independent learning, Chinese students must adopt the required skills, especially critical thinking skills, by being actively involved in various learning activities in and outside of class. The acquisition of these independent learning skills is challenging, as it demands a lot of practice and many conscious decisions during cognitive processes. For instance, students may need to override some of their own cultural values in order to adopt a Western critical thinking and argumentation style. Warring's (2010) study suggests training programs could help facilitate independent learning and help students to adapt academically. However, a full adoption of Western independent learning may not occur (Durkin, 2008a), because students are reluctant to discard their own cultural values. Therefore, the practice of taking the "Middle Way," coined by Durkin (2008a) may be a solution.

How teachers and institutions can help. In Warring's (2010) study, the students came to accept, after a long period of facilitation (the process of pursuing a bachelor's degree in business) that they, rather than their teachers, are responsible for their own learning. This result suggests that independent learning can be taught and cultivated in a facilitative environment, and teachers can aid in this process through directed assistance and guidance. As an example of this, in my cohort program, a professor explained the requirements of a group assignment and suggested that we complete it over a 3-month period by working on it regularly, rather than leaving it to the last minute. However, as far as I know, many of us did not follow the professor's suggestion and turned in work completed at the last-minute. Waiting until the last minute is a strategy commonly used by Chinese students. However, this behaviour indicates that, as students at graduate level, we lacked the skills to monitor our own learning. On reflection, I imagine the

professor did not realize these graduate students were still dependent learners. If he had checked our progress on a regular basis, this would have impressed upon the students that we needed to manage and monitor our own learning. This example suggests that one-time explicit explanations of expectations may not be sufficient for dependent students in the preliminary stages. More guidance or supervision from teachers is initially necessary.

Teachers can help cultivate Chinese students' critical thinking skills by choosing topics familiar to the students. One successful example of this is found in the study of a cohort graduate program at Brock University (Guo & O'Sullivan, 2012). The chosen learning materials included *China from the Inside, Manufactured Landscapes*, and *Up the Yangtze* which are documentary films by Western, English-speaking filmmakers. These films showed the students subjects that were familiar to them evaluated from another perspective. This is a practical way of facilitating a better understanding of Western critical thinking.

Short-term training during orientation weeks and a series of academic workshops are often held throughout the academic year in order to help international students, including Chinese students, to gain more knowledge and skills for independent learning. Compared with for-credit or longer training courses, these support services are less effective. During my first term at UVic, I attended some of these workshops. At first, I spotted many Chinese students. However, the majority of them only showed up once or twice. I asked a first-year undergraduate why she did not come back again. She told me she had hoped to have the opportunity to practice skills for independent learning, only to find that only general knowledge was given at the workshop. I talked about this issue with the staff responsible for the workshop, and was told they provided the general knowledge as a *tool*, and students were expected to practice with the *tool* independently. In other words, a dependent student should independently learn how to be

independent. With this gap between information and implementation in mind, I would suggest that support services consider adding some practical learning activities to their programs for students to build up skills. For example, it might be helpful if a professor of Education specializing in Curriculum and Instruction organized such activities.

Adapting to Group Work

In Western institutions of higher education, students are not only expected to work independently, but also collaboratively. Group work as an approach to learning and teaching in the Western learning context is not familiar to many Chinese students, though some may have had experience with it in previous learning settings. To succeed in their new learning environment, Chinese students must adapt to the concepts and processes of group work. Support from teachers and institutions in this aspect of learning is also necessary.

What Chinese students need to do. In Chinese learning contexts, students lack not only knowledge of group work and the skills needed to perform it, but also the motivation to participate (Han, 2009). Group work seems unlikely to be adopted in the near future as the dominant approach to learning and teaching, or as a means of assessment of learning in Chinese educational settings. Thus, it would be wise for Chinese students to prepare ahead if they are planning to study in a Western setting where tertiary students are required to participate in group work. Taking an online course about group work is a good starting point. Two suggestions for these kinds of courses are found on Coursera: the first is Academic Discussion in English from UCI which teaches discussion and communication skills, and the second is Foundations of Everyday Leadership, offered by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The latter is 5-

week course that teaches students how to use leadership skills to work more effectively with others. By attending such courses, students can gain direct experience with the group work commonly practiced in Western universities.

If students can afford the time and cost, it would be helpful for them to attend some international preparatory programs before beginning their programs overseas. For example, the Continuous Studies Department at the University of British Columbia provides International Undergraduate and Graduate Study Preparation Programs, in which students can experience group work in academic settings (https://cstudies.ubc.ca/sites/cstudies.ubc.ca/files/cs/documents/ program/ipp/ipp_brochure_chinese.pdf).

Negative attitudes or erroneous beliefs about group work were found to lead to inactive participation in the initial stages of studying at a Western university (Li & Campbell, 2008). Therefore, it is very important for students to appreciate the value and importance of group work as an approach to learning and teaching, and to develop a positive attitude towards it. Students should understand that peers can be learning partners of equal importance as their teachers in the context of group work.

Chinese students should keep in mind that active participation and practice are the most effective methods of adapting to group work. Thus, they need to dispel any negative effects of their cultural inheritance that hold them back from active engagement. First, students should understand that one learns from one's mistakes, and that fear of making mistakes in public may help *save face* in the short run but could cause us to *lose face* in the long run. For example, in Xue's (2013) study, a participant shared that he avoided talking in group discussions and chose to simply listen. The other group members assumed he had no interest in the topic. This student later realized that keeping silent cost him the opportunity to practice his spoken English, and thus

his communication skills were lagging. Second, students should leave the concept of *face* behind in China, once they enter a new learning environment where people around them may not care as much about *face*. For example, the participants in Y. Wang's (2012) study noticed that some domestic students also made mistakes, but they continued to express themselves. These participants thus saw that *losing face* was not a big issue in their new learning setting. Likewise, students need to realize that violating the Chinese principle of harmony in communication may be a necessary step in order for them to develop a new identity as a Western group member and to understand the Western conception of harmony. For example, the following participant (Y. Wang, 2012) realized it was more important to be constructive in teamwork after some practice:

I used to hesitate to argue against group member's opinions, because I did not want to appear unfriendly. When I saw they had a point that seemed better than mine, I readily gave up my ideas. However, others thought I had made few contributions. As time went by I started to talk more. If they disagreed, they would discuss and explain their points. When I had what I considered to be a good point, I no longer gave it up easily, as happened before. (p. 530)

This is a very good example to demonstrate why there is no reason to be overly concerned about *harmony*, and that one shouldn't put more energy into keeping a veneer of agreement than on the successful completion of the academic task at hand.

In addition, Chinese students should break out of their comfort zone and avoid forming their own cultural sub-communities while forming groups, as research suggests that significant contact with domestic and other international peers may help Chinese students adapt better to

group work and improve their language and cultural competence (Gram et al., 2013; Y. Wang, 2012; Xue, 2013). While it may be true that having a sense of belonging is important for students when they first leave their home country, choosing to work only with Chinese peers will limit the benefits to be gained from interactions with group members from diverse cultures. I noticed some Chinese students preferred to sit next to each other in class when I was auditing an undergraduate course at UVic. They also tended to do group work with Chinese peers. One day I sat next to two other Chinese students, and we formed a group of three to discuss a topic. During the discussion, one of them spoke Chinese in a low voice. I could see firsthand how sitting near other Chinese students can restrict students from having contact with peers from other cultures, and that this enables students to use their first language during class work, thus hindering development of English communication skills. With this in mind, I sat near domestic or international students rather than Chinese in class. This also helped me to access different points of view on the topic at hand, instead of sharing similar views with other Chinese students.

How teachers and institutions can help. Even if students do try to prepare ahead of time for the transition to their new learning environment, support from host teachers and institutions is still vital, especially during the initial stages of the programs. The most pertinent thing they can do is gain a good working knowledge of their Chinese (or other international) students' backgrounds: their previous educational experience, learning preferences, cultural values, and familiarity (or lack thereof) with group work. Then, while designing and facilitating group work, teachers can take into consideration their students' prior knowledge and experience in order to enable these students to be active and enthusiastic participants in group discussions and projects. Second, teachers can facilitate multicultural interaction by encouraging mixed culture groupings in class, because significant contact with domestic peers and other

international students has proven to be an effective way of encouraging international students to participate in group work.

Conclusion

As a Chinese international graduate student in Canada, I interpreted practical implications through my reflection over the findings in the literature review and my own experience. The findings in the review made me realize more efforts are required for EFL teachers in terms of developing students' all-round language skills. What is more, students' responsibilities in the process of language learning should be emphasized if they anticipate success both in Chinese and Western learning environments. The Internet-based learning and resources may help Chinese students prepare before departure. After arriving at English-speaking universities, a close rapport between Chinese students and host communities is essential in solving language difficulties and difficulties caused by their divergent approaches to learning and teaching.

Reflection and Limitations

As a Chinese international graduate student, I found that I encountered the same problems as those cited in the literature; for example, difficulties with understanding spoken English, particularly when spoken quickly or with accents I was not used to. I found it helpful to ask the speaker to slow down or repeat what they said. It was also helpful to ask for the spelling of words I found difficult to understand due to accents. On occasions when it was not possible to make such requests, I didn't worry too much about missed words and tried to follow as best I could in order to grasp the general idea. As for improving my speaking abilities, unfortunately, I was not able to take full advantage of the support services offered on campus, which no doubt would have been beneficial, because I was overwhelmed with course work. Through this project I identified where some of my problems stemmed from and writing this paper helped me to consolidate my experiences with others'.

When it came to academic reading, I must admit that I, like so many of the Chinese students featured in the literature review, also lacked appropriate strategies for reading journal articles (though I had scored the high level of Band 8.5 in the IELTS reading module). I was not trained to be a critical reader, therefore I was not used to Western reading strategies such as comparing and contrasting, analyzing, or synthesizing information. My Chinese educational background had only prepared me to restate detailed information from the articles I was reading. While writing the literature review section of this paper, I reread the selected articles again and again. After a while, I began to learn how to apply those reading strategies, but not adventurously.

While reviewing the difficulties Chinese students had with academic writing, I always reflected over my own learning curve during the writing of this paper. Through my work on this project, I learned how important it is to be responsible for one's own learning. For example, before I attended UVic, I knew next to nothing about writing in APA style. All I knew was that APA meant using a 12-point Times New Roman font and double spacing. In my first class at UVic, the professor introduced the APA format in the form of a 272-page manual he held up before the class. When he suggested we use APA style to finish a five-page essay, I was shocked; it seemed impossible to finish reading such a thick book and complete a five-page paper in seven days. I did not finish reading the manual until after I turned in the assignment. When writing the references list, rather than carefully reading the manual's instructions on how to arrange the list, I exported citations in APA format from the UVic library's database. I used this short cut while writing other assignments and never bothered to check the accuracy of my work in the manual, because I trusted in the exactitude of the copied information from the library's database. My ignorance and assumptions about academic writing and APA formatting led me to make many mistakes in formatting, manuscript structure, citations and referencing, and the mechanics of style when I was writing my literature review. In the beginning of my program, I assumed the domestic students already knew how to do all these things when they entered university and that only international students were at a disadvantage. By researching and doing this project, I have learned all students have to take responsibility and learn how this is done.

What I struggled with the most is the critical approach to writing a literature review. After I finished several drafts, my supervisors told me they were still unable to find *critical analysis* in my writing. I could not develop good reasoning and arguments about the literature because I had never been trained to do so. I read a lot of review articles and tried to model them.

This only served to increase my knowledge on the research topic. To help me overcome my difficulties, one of my supervisors offered to co-write a short paragraph. This explicit and direct teaching was helpful as I started to understand *critical thinking* in academic writing. However, I still struggled. My other supervisor used many different methods to help me. Most frequently, he facilitated my independence. For example, he insisted I write, and then rewrite after receiving his feedback. In his feedback, he asked questions or provided prompts rather than giving me specific instructions on how to revise the paper. This was frustrating at first. But after many trials I came up with some acceptable argumentative paragraphs. From this experience, I learned one cannot develop *critical thinking* without sufficient practice. And, with practice, I no longer depend on my supervisors as I did at the beginning of this writing project.

Whereas my own experience with adapting to Western learning resonates with that of the students in the literature review, perhaps one of the limitations of this research is that most of the implications I present are based on my own experiences in the classroom, both as an EFL teacher and as an international student, which may reduce the objectivity of the research. Another limitation is I ignored the demographic differences within the group, which consists of graduate and undergraduate students. There is the possibility that participants from these two categories may experience different types of problems during their academic adaptation, based on the differences in previous educational experiences and maturity levels.

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