

Oral English, culture, and strategies: Propellers and road-blockers in learning for Chinese international students

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Abstract:

There has been a continuous growth in the number of Chinese international students in the pursuit of western higher education in Australia over last decade. The University of Tasmania (UTAS) Statistics Archive (2010) indicated that in 2009 the total number of Chinese international students occupied over 52% of the entire number of international students in UTAS. While international students in institutions of higher education in English-speaking countries make valuable educational and economic contributions, concerns have also risen in relation to the academic and social issues these students have faced. This research seeks to highlight the communicative problems Chinese international students encounter at UTAS. The strategies students utilise to overcome these communication barriers are also investigated in the research. A qualitative methodological research design, underpinned by a social constructivist theoretical framework, was used for this research. Thirty-five Chinese international students at UTAS were involved in an online survey for data collection. The data were analysed using a constant comparative qualitative data analysis approach. The results indicated that Chinese international students mainly employ compensation strategies (Oxford, 1990) to propel them forward in overcoming communicative barriers. However, the strategies students use also act as road-blockers that diminish student motivation to improve English competence. The findings also suggested that cultural and educational backgrounds play an important role in students' adjustment. Accordingly, there is a need for Chinese international students to be equipped with skills and strategies to improve oral English in a naturalistic linguistic environment.

Keywords:

Chinese international students, communicative barriers, language learning strategies

Introduction

English language skills are highly valued in Asian countries, especially in China, as English is considered to be a universal language which enables people to communicate and do business with different nations. Many Chinese people believe that sufficient English skills can lead to

better careers with higher salaries in the future. In order to obtain such skills many people in China decide to study overseas. In countries where the English language is spoken, Australia is one of the most favourable choices. According to the current Australian Education International (2010) statistics, the total number of Chinese international students studying in Australia has shown a continuous growth to over 40,000 in 2009, nearly double its number in 2007. The University of Tasmania (UTAS) Statistics Archive (2010) also indicated that in 2009 the total number of Chinese international students occupied over 52% of the entire number of international students at UTAS. While international students in institutions of higher education in English-speaking countries make valuable educational and economic contributions (Australian Council for Private Education and Training, 2009), concerns have also risen in relation to the academic and social issues these students have faced.

Communicative barriers

One of the most common difficulties experienced by many Chinese international students is due to communicative barriers, which prevent them from effective learning and interaction in university activities (Skyrme, 2007). According to Ballard and Clanchy (1997), international students' insufficient communicative accountability in English also contributes to negative teacher-student relationships. For instance, academic staff may increasingly begrudge the time they spend with international students, whereas the students, working under the same pressure, may decide that their problems are really due to racism, discrimination, or to victimisation by unsympathetic staff. Besides, research also suggests that communicative barriers may result in a decrease in teaching efficiency (Beaver & Tuck, 1999; Li & Kaye, 1998), and in creating misconceptions and stereotypes (Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001).

Issues in oral English learning

Communication is the ultimate goal of learning a second language, as it is "... at the heart of modern English language teaching" (Luoma, 2004, p. ix). However, English learning classes in China tend to focus predominantly on one or two of the four identified language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), sometimes to the exclusion of the others (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Research also indicates that speaking is usually the least developed skill in language classes in China (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; O'Neill & Gish, 2008). Based on the grammar-translation approach, the goal of English learning is for students to be able to read and translate passages and articles between Mandarin and English whilst speaking skills are vastly neglected by both teachers and students. Some teachers may perceive communicative English as only necessary for teaching Chinese people who are about to go to English-speaking countries, but not for the majority of learners (Burnaby & Sun, 1989). Although debate about whether China should adopt the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method in modern English language classes is occurring at present (Liao, 2004; Rao, 2006), its implementation is not expected to be consistent or rapid. Due to these contextual constraints, it is expected that it will be a while before all English language learners can benefit from the CLT program.

Culture

Babiker, Cox and Miller (1980) developed the theory of “cultural distance” in which they suggested that the greater the distance between home culture and host culture, the more cultural difficulty overseas students experience. As China and Australia possess two distinctive social and cultural norms and customs, students may encounter culture shock after they arrive in Australia (Yue & Le, 2010). For instance, some Chinese international students indicated contradictive attitudes towards parties and socialising activities which are favoured by many Australians (Gao, 2000). Although the fact that Chinese international students try hard to blend into the local culture is evident in the research (Townsend & Poh, 2008; Xiao & Petraki, 2007), the conversational difficulties still cannot be ignored. One Chinese student elaborated that “when I’m talking to local students ... we just don’t have much common interest and this stops us from talking very much ... and our values and beliefs are different” (Campbell & Li, 2008, p. 385). Brislin (1981) described this type of phenomenon as an attempt to find “conversational currency” (p. 65). People in different countries have different conversational topics. For instance, the conversational topic of sport is, in Australia, a common “currency” used in a range of conversational situations. Australians are interested in footy, cricket and swimming, yet few of these topics are traditionally shared as sporting activities for Chinese people. Therefore, a lack of mutual interest is inevitable.

Strategies

There are numerous approaches which may result in oral English proficiency, such as attending intensive English classes, talking to native speakers, and self practising. All these approaches reflect what is called “learning strategies”. Studies in relation to second language learning strategies have evolved over time, and among which, Oxford’s (1990) work was one of the most significant contributions to the field. She defined learning strategies as “the specific action, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students use to improve their own progress in developing skills in a second or foreign language” (p. 3). Oxford also developed a learning strategies taxonomy, which comprised six categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. This taxonomy has been seen as perhaps the most comprehensive classification of learning strategies to date (Ellis, 1994). The taxonomy has been referred to in many past studies in relation to second language research, and is also used in this paper.

Research suggests that Chinese students have a tendency to use metacognitive strategies in English learning behaviour (Goh & Foong, 1997; Li, 2007; Rao, 2006). Metacognitive means “... beyond, beside, or with the cognitive” (Oxford, 1990, p. 136) and refers to a type of learning behaviour which involves arranging, planning, and evaluating the learnt materials. However, considering the fact that few of these studies were conducted in a foreign setting, and none focused specifically on the communicative aspects of English learning for students, it could be suggested that students in these studies may not use the same strategies in overseas contexts.

The study

There are factors that maintain Chinese international students' commitment to communication in an English-speaking country and propel them forward. There are also factors that act as road-blockers, which diminish students' motivation in socialising and English language learning. These factors, coined propellers and road-blockers, respectively, are explored and discussed in the current study.

Participants

Thirty-five current Chinese international students participated in this research. The majority of students were between 20 and 30 years of age, and had been resident in Australia for at least six months. Students were randomly selected across different campuses, academic levels and faculties through the Chinese international students name list. The entire selection and recruitment processes were conducted by the International Students Service Adviser to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Ethical permission was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee before the commencement of data collection.

Data collection

An online survey was developed for the data collection. The survey consisted mainly of open questions for students to elaborate on their personal communicative experiences while at UTAS. The data collection started in May, 2010, and took a period of six weeks to complete. All participants received an email invitation attached with an Information Sheet and a website link to the online survey. Participants were expected to complete the survey at their own convenience. A follow-up email reminder was sent every two weeks after the first invitation, which was also attached with the Information Sheet.

Data analysis

A constant comparative qualitative data analysis approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was applied in this research. In the beginning, an open coding of each student's responses was developed, and similar concepts were grouped. After sorting the concepts, comparisons were made in connection with relevant literature and thereby developed as axial codes. The final step was to further compare and contrast the axial coding to look for the themes or "big ideas" that underlie the research.

What are the road-blockers for communication?

The students' responses reveal a number of difficulties, or road blockers, in relation to their communicative experiences at UTAS. The following section will present and discuss each road-blocker for communication respectively.

Vocabulary

The data suggest that a lack of vocabulary resources is the main contributing factor which prevents Chinese international students from participating and engaging in academic and social activities. For instance, when asked about the social experience with English-speaking people, a typical answer would be that:

The biggest problem is that I can't express my meaning very well, because I often can't find the right word to describe and express my opinion.

In fact, many students were concerned about their inability to use a suitable English word to express themselves. Some other times students may simply forget to use the word that they have learned before.

Accent and slang

Students' unfamiliarity with English vocabulary not only creates difficulties in speaking, but also prevents them from listening to and understanding the conversation. The Australian accent coupled with the use of colloquial language and slang in daily conversations also contributed to the difficulties of comprehension in communication. For example, one participant recalled that:

When I talk to people outside the uni, especially local farmers, I feel difficult to understand them because of the accent... they pronounce several words together inside the mouth so I can't hear which words they are saying. Also, they sometimes use slang to make jokes. In these situations, I will not understand anything.

This student has particularly emphasised difficulties in listening to the local Tasmanian English, as sometimes the pronunciation was glued together and vowels were stretched. Moreover, when colloquial or slang is used in sentences, it may double the difficulties of comprehension for the student.

Culture

The literature suggests that for people who are separated by "cultural distance" (Babiker et al., 1980), it is difficult to find a shared "conversational currency" (Brislin, 1981). Such difficulty was also reflected in the students' data. For instance, a Chinese international student described her experience of talking to her classmates:

... the topic, that older generations always talk about their kids, gardening or housework, which I don't concern a lot. The younger one may talk about the Australian fashion which I don't know much. Some of them don't have enough patience to hear what I want to say. The way they think is quite different from us, and we may misunderstand each other most of the time... they are also busy with their kids and homework, so we don't have much time to get together to talk.

The effort this student put into a conversation was obvious, as she had been trying to talk to a range of people from different age groups. However, she was not successful in seeking a suitable conversational topic. Moreover, some of her classmates also lost patience in waiting for her responses in a conversation.

Confidence and motivation

Communicative difficulties have the potential to significantly reduce a student's linguistic and social confidence. In the current study, a Chinese international student recalled a loss of motivation to participate in tutorials:

I never speak in tutorials. I need time to gather my thoughts and organize my speech in mind even though I know it can be casual. But most of the time when I'm ready to speak, other classmates have spoken my ideas already. They are faster than me and can better explain stuff. So I don't bother to speak.

This student has shown reluctance sharing ideas and opinions in the tutorial discussion, as he believed that his English-speaking classmates could better articulate the meanings than he could. It may be assumed that once this student has lost faith in his ability to communicate effectively, it would reduce the possibility of him making progress in the future.

Accordingly, to speak in public involves "risk taking" for Chinese international students, as they have to search for the right word and expression, try their best to understand the local accent, seek a conversational topic that has mutual interest between two cultures, and also strive to maintain confidence and motivation. These risks are tied together with each other, acting as "road-blockers" that hinder students' achievements in effective communication.

The role of cultural and educational backgrounds in English learning

As discussed earlier, vocabulary limitation is the most concerning issue for many Chinese international students. The data suggest that the English knowledge students acquire in China does not prepare them for the real social interaction in an English-speaking country. In this sense, it is critical to examine the role that cultural and educational backgrounds play in English education for Chinese students. When asked about students' perceptions of the impact of social and cultural differences, a Chinese international student recalled that:

Local people always have more natural expressions which they use in daily communication. These expressions, however, never be introduced in textbooks in China. Life is much more than "nice to meet u" and much much more complicated than just to talk about the weather after all.

This student indicated dissatisfaction with her current English knowledge, attributing the communicative difficulties to the limits of her vocabulary and cultural understanding. This student has vividly outlined the English language learning experience in China as reading and repeating the materials from the English textbooks. A merit of using textbooks is that it is a standardised learning material which ensures every student acquires the same knowledge at the same pace. It also eases teachers' workloads as they only need to focus on delivering the knowledge without too much concern about the learning scope and sequence for large class sizes. However, perhaps one of the biggest drawbacks of learning from textbooks is that textbooks do not introduce and model authentic English usage and expression in diverse and unpredictable social situations. Moreover, it may be anticipated that English language teachers in China are not aware of the cultural knowledge required for authentic language teaching, and therefore do not recognise the need for the development of intercultural knowledge and understanding as preparation for students who plan to study in an English speaking context. In this sense, it is not

surprising that Chinese international students report having limited control over authentic English communicative situations.

What are the propellers in communication?

Although road-blockers exist to prevent Chinese international students from effective social communication, students seek pathways out. According to the data, compensation strategies appeared to be the favoured choice for students to overcome the communicative barriers. Compensation strategies are intended to "...make up for an inadequate repertoire of grammar and, especially, of vocabulary" (Oxford, 1990, p. 47). In regards to the current research, Chinese international students have used different approaches to compensate for these communicative barriers and to propel them forward in social interactions. For instance, some common responses were:

I will express myself in an easier way of the same meaning.

I will use some gestures, or try to find some other words to describe what I want to say.

I'll use my body language and some common English words to explain my meaning.

It is certain that these Chinese international students have successfully applied compensation strategies to overcome the limits of their vocabulary. It cannot be denied that approaches such as using body language and synonyms are handy solutions in resolving communicative problems, especially in the immediate context. Through the use of compensation strategies, language constraints can be eased successfully, and misunderstandings are clarified spontaneously. In addition, the effective use of compensation strategies enables the student to maintain the flow of the conversation, and thereby protecting their communicative and social confidence. Therefore, it is acknowledged that compensation strategies play significant roles in social communication for Chinese international students.

The role of compensation strategies in English learning

It is critical to point out that although compensation strategies can effectively moderate international students' communicative constraints, they may not contribute towards the development of English proficiency for the students. The strategies that the students tend to rely on can perhaps be characterised as "short term" solutions that do not support the development of communicative English for the Chinese international students. For example, a Chinese international student demonstrated use of an English grammatical pattern to overcome the limit of her vocabulary:

I use words that have similar meanings to express my ideas. Sometimes if I want to say the word with the opposite meaning but I don't know the opposite word, I will use 'not', i.e. sufficient, not sufficient (in case I don't know 'insufficient'). Usually people can understand me and they have good guessing skills.

The strength of this student is that she discovered and successfully exercised the English grammatical pattern such as putting the negation word "not" to describe an antonym. However, the drawback of relying on this grammatical pattern is that it does not help to expand the student's vocabulary bank. Furthermore, the real meaning that the student wants to convey may be lost or misunderstood due to inappropriate use of English grammatical patterns. Therefore, as

Brown (1980) and Ellis (1986) note, the use of compensation strategies may actually prevent successful language learning as an overuse of compensation strategies may reduce the student's need or motivation for learning. A student who continually relies on compensation strategies to negotiate language learning situations may gain in the short term, yet this may not translate into a deep understanding of the way English is used in an authentic situation.

Conclusion

Due to the cultural and linguistic differences between China and Australia, Chinese international students have encountered numerous social and communicative difficulties while studying at UTAS. In the current research, student participants have shown awareness of their oral English constraints, which they attribute mainly to a lack of vocabulary resources. Students have also demonstrated different learning strategies to deal with various communicative problems that they encounter in social activities. Through the lens of a social constructivist perspective, analysis of the data suggested that some strategies students use act as propellers to propel students forward in overcoming communicative barriers. However, such strategies also function as road-blockers which diminish the need for learning to a certain extent. Although it is commonly believed that an authentic linguistic environment can boost language proficiency, in terms of the current research, such boosting is not obvious. Accordingly, it is suggested that Chinese international students need to be equipped with strategies and skills that will enable them to improve oral English in a naturalistic linguistic environment.

While Chinese international students strive to improve their oral English at UTAS, the impact of their cultural and educational backgrounds on learning should not be negated by academic teaching staff. Instead, teachers of international students need to be aware of the existing mismatch between the past English learning experiences Chinese international students have had and the current learning approaches students encounter at UTAS. It is vital for academic teaching staff to employ explicit modelling and teaching strategies to Chinese international students, as it will foster students' adjustments between two different cultural and educational practices, thereby allowing effective teaching and learning to take place at UTAS.

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