



The 15th National and International Conference
"Global Goals, Local Actions: Looking Back and Moving Forward 2022"
21 March, 2022

Learning English Experiences of Ten High School Students in China: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explored Chinese high school students' English language experiences. The study examined the challenges students face when learning English in school, the role of gender in learning English, and whether Chinese languages positively or negatively influenced English acquisition. Ten participants were selected through the purposive sampling method. Data collection methods included interviews and focus group sessions. The findings showed that the most significant academic challenges for Chinese students when learning English were vocabulary, grammar, and lack of environment for practicing English speaking. In addition, students wanted better teaching methods. However, the Chinese language had no bearing on learning English. The findings from this study can help Chinese education authorities to improve the curriculum and provide better English teaching strategies. Quantitative survey methods should be used in future research and should include a larger sample size for generalizing the results to a wider population.

Keywords: Translanguaging, Motivation, Student-Centered Learning

Introduction

English is a global language spoken by 1.35 billion people, and it is an official language in 67 countries. English is used to maintain international commerce, science, technology, business, education, and tourism (Rao, 2019). Although the English language is used as a medium for learning, students struggle to learn it because it is complicated. English learning problems include learning grammar and vocabulary, teaching methods, and motivation.

Britain, where the English language originates, had been the center of industry and innovation since the Industrial Revolution. Countries that traded with Britain needed to learn



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English to conduct commerce. As trade became a world endeavor leading to cultural pluralism, English became essential for communication.

China’s economic growth increased the demand for learning English as more organizations began to attach great importance to the English language as a medium for communication in the global economy (Bolton & Graddol, 2012). In 2001, China mandated English language teaching from elementary education. The rapid growth of private language schools across the country has further enhanced the English language importance in the country (Bolton & Graddol, 2012). However, the favorability of the English language because of its economic value portrays a hegemonic influence on Chinese ideology and culture, a problem that some authorities grapple with today (Shang, 2020).

While English is spoken in many countries, learning it has its problems. Teachers often lack teaching resources, and learners have limited cultural knowledge of the English language, which is necessary for authentic practical English lessons. Although students study English for six or more years in junior and high school, they fail to speak the language because they focus on examinations. Students learn and memorize grammar without using the language in conversations. Students only focus on passing examinations (Ikegashira, Matsumot & Morita, 2009). In addition, the irregular orthography of English, is a problem when learning English. The words are spelled the same, even though they are pronounced differently (Miller, 2019, p. 1). In addition, Chinese and English have the different language structures and Chinese students have difficulties differentiating between them (Chawwang, 2008). Thus, students fail to express themselves in English because the first language interferes with the second language acquisition (Sinha, et al., 2009, p. 118).

Teaching strategies play a huge role in helping students learn the English language. In a study conducted in Thailand, Noom-ura (2013) found that methods used by teachers in the classroom were not conducive to encouraging students to practice the language. Furthermore, the curriculum in China emphasizes grammar to ensure that students prepare for examinations. Students have book knowledge called “dumb English” – because they cannot speak it (He, 2013).

Purpose of study

This study explored the challenges students face when learning English, including the role gender plays in learning English and whether the Chinese languages positively or negatively influenced English acquisition. The reserach questions included: What challenges Chinese high school students face when they learn English; the differences in male and female



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students' experiences when learning English; and whether the local Chinese languages affected the learning of English.

Literature Review

Theories on Learning English

A variety of studies have been conducted on learning a foreign language in China over the decades. Studies on policy issues (Khan, et al., 2017) teachers' perceptions (Yan & He, 2010) disparity in resources between North and South China (Hu, 2003). However, many studies have been on teaching strategies in primary schools, secondary schools, and colleges (Fan & Li, 2021; McLeod-Chambless, 2021; Wright & Zheng, 2017), including the use of technology to teach English (Fan & Antl, 2020). Furthermore, researchers have also discussed the theory that explains language acquisition in many of these studies.

Several language acquisition theories play a pivotal role in language learning. These theories include sociocultural theory, learning styles, and motivation. Vygotsky's (1987) sociocultural theory explains how language develops and promotes social development and social interaction. The theory of human learning combines sociocultural perspectives and includes social interactions and biological perspectives that deal with communication. Vygotsky's theory, the Zone of Proximal Development, explains how learning requires the assistance of an expert to help move a student from what he knows and can do by himself to what he is unable to do by himself. In other words, language acquisition depends on social interaction.

Theories of Learning styles play a critical role in the classroom because they help learners process language learning efficiently and effectively. Fleming and Mills (1992) proposed four learning styles: visual learners, aural learners, verbal learners, kinesthetic learners. Visual learners like to learn by using their eyes. They learn better through pictures or videos, charts, diagrams. Aural learners use their hearing to process information that comes to them in sound, music, stories, lectures, or audiotapes. Verbal learners enjoy using words. They are good at expressing their thoughts and are better at using language to learn and solve problems. Kinesthetic learners learn better when doing physical activities. They are more likely to learn a language through activities or movement.

Learning styles, however, do not guarantee that a person will learn a language quickly. To acquire knowledge, a person must assimilate and accommodate what they learn. However, assimilation can be a problem for learners because of the dominance of their first language. Mukhopadhyay (2018) studied both Hispanics born in the USA and foreign-born. The findings



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showed that those born in the USA did well in examinations as they had assimilated and had accommodated the English language and could use it. For Spanish people born outside of the USA, their language interfered with English.

Motivation Theories

Gardner (2001) developed instrumental and integrative motivation theories used in language learning. Instrumental motivation is defined as engaging in an activity for practical purposes, such as learning the language to travel abroad or get international jobs. Students who have instrumental motivation learn English to pass exams. Hong and Ganapathy (2017) studied 12 students in Malaysia. The results showed that 83% of the students had instrumental motivation to improve their writing skills. On the other hand, some students learned the language so that they could integrate and communicate with society. Students who learn English to learn a new language have integrative motivation. In Scotland, Hudson (2017) investigated the role of integrative motivation in learning English. The results showed that most overseas learners learned the language because they wanted to integrate into the English culture. Nevertheless, Ta'ani (2018) argues that both integrative and instrumental have a role in motivating students to learn English.

Factors Affecting English Learning in China

Various studies have shown that many factors positively or negatively influence learning English as a second language. These factors include a) academic challenges in mastering the vocabulary and problems students have in reading and writing and listening to English; b) teacher pedagogical problems such as teachers' inexperience, the use of teacher-centered instruction, and the use of Chinese in teaching English; c) students motivation for learning English; and, d) the effect of Chinese Languages on English language learning. In addition, the literature indicates that gender does play a role in language learning (Wightman, 2020).

Students learning English find difficulties learning and using English vocabulary, learning grammar, and pronunciation. In addition, students have challenges in listening, reading, and writing English. Acquisition of a language also depends on pedagogical approaches. Problems in pedagogy may stem from teachers' inexperience in teaching English or the use of teacher-centered instruction. In some cases, students are unable to learn a language properly because teachers use the Chinese language to teach English.



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Furthermore, English teachers in China do not have comprehensive English teaching skills. They teach according to Chinese education standards and requirements. Classroom processes, including teaching strategies, are rigid and inflexible. Teachers are more comfortable with Teacher-centered methods and do not know how to set tests because they rely on high-stakes examination scores. As a result, students have less chance to use the language (Mascolo, 2009).

Another issue is the use of the Chinese Language to Explain English. In some English language classes, teachers use ‘translanguaging’ or ‘code-switching’ to help students understand terms or phrases. Translanguaging uses the first language to describe and clarify words and sentences from the second language (Fang & Liu, 2020). According to Fang and Liu (2020), translanguaging is accepted by stakeholders in China and that students learn English better when the first language is combined with the second language.

Of importance to learning a language is the effect of the first Language on English Learning. The mother tongue and culture can positively or negatively affect students’ communication in the foreign language (Yadav, 2014). There are several interrelated ways that the first language affects the learning of a second language. Differences in language structure can interfere with learning a new language. Students from different regions may interact with the language differently depending on how the dialect is structured.

Literature also shows that gender can impact the learning of a second language. Students have specific learning styles and preferences, and in language acquisition, the differences are specifically evident between male and female students. Women are fluent and articulate in oral speech, while men have difficulties achieving fluency. Men stutter more than women. However, men’s conversation and speech patterns are more logical and philosophical (Wahyuningsih, 2018) than women’s.

Methodology

Research Design

The study was qualitative phenomenology research. Unlike quantitative research that draws numerical data and quantifies respondents’ behaviors, and attitudes from surveys, qualitative research aims to understand participants’ experiences and uncover their opinions, reasons, and views regarding issues participants face. Its philosophy assumes that people have different perspectives and see the world through multiple realities (Cresswell, 1998). A phenomenological design was chosen because it enabled the researchers to appreciate



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participants' perceptions, systematically interpreting their experiences and describing their lived experiences, and the meaning they attach to the phenomena (Cresswell, 2013).

Sampling Methods

Creswell (1998) indicates that 5 to 25 participants are adequate for phenomenological studies. Therefore, ten 17-year-old sophomores students (five male and five female) from No.1 High School, Gong Zhu Ling, China, were selected using purposive sampling methods. Purposive sampling is a technique used in qualitative studies to identify participants who have a deeper understanding of the issue (Palinkas, et al., 2015). Mrs. Thomas (pseudo name), a teacher at the school, assisted in selecting students who had one year of high school education, could discuss their experience and were not preparing for examinations.

Data Collection Methods and Procedure

Interviews and focus group sessions were used to collect the data. An interview protocol (See Table 1) was used as a guide during interviews. The interview questions were based on the three research questions discussed above. Each interview question was semi-structured and open-ended so that the participants would be free to answer openly and present their views. After the interviews, focus group sessions were conducted using questions that were developed from the interview findings. A focus group gathers data through small group interviews and interaction where panel members answer, discuss, or debate questions raised by the interviewer (Morgan, 1996). The purpose of the focus group sessions was to confirm the interview findings. The focus groups comprised of 5 participants each. The first group had two males and three females. The second focus group was comprised of three males and two females. Due to the prevalence of Covid 19, the focus groups were conducted online using the WeChat online platform. Both interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. After each interview, I called each student and read the transcripts to determine whether the translated content was what they wanted to express.

Data Analysis

I conducted content analysis to find themes from the data. Each paragraph was coded. In qualitative research, coding is the classification of the obtained data according to common messages (Mountain, 2010). I did the coding manually as I made comments and highlighted sentences or words that I identified as themes. I also kept a journal where I wrote memos on new codes and my thoughts about what I was understanding from the analysis. After finding



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the patterns, I decided to classify the categories according to research questions. Some categories did not fit into the research questions and were written separately from other findings. After completing the coding, I rechecked the themes to confirm the categories, and then I sent them to Mrs. Thomas for peer review to ensure that they were true to the situation in China.

Findings and Discussion of Findings

The findings and discussion are organized around the research questions.

Question 1: What challenges do Chinese high school students face when they learn English?

Data analysis showed that most students had difficulties learning vocabulary, grammar, reading, and listening. Other challenges were the conversational elements of learning English, such as speaking and pronunciation. In addition, students felt that some of these challenges were a result of poor teaching strategies.

Vocabulary and Grammar

Nine of ten students mentioned that they could not memorize or remember or pronounce the English words because there were unfamiliar. Some English words, although spelled the same, had different meanings. In addition, five students spoke of the many English grammar rules that needed to be memorized. Other studies have found the same problem and indicate that lack of vocabulary and grammar leads to a decline in the English Language reading and speaking ability. English has many exceptions to the rules, and learning the many exceptions is difficult (Akinbod, 2008). Conversely, the Chinese language breaks long sentences into shorter sentences for comprehension (Ling & Sepora, 2013). To speak a language, the learner must understand the meaning of the words (Raximovna, et al., 2020) and memorize the terminology and the grammar because they form the base of the language (Sadri & Firouzi, 2017).

Need for an Environment for Practicing English

One of the most important findings was the lack of opportunity to practice speaking the language. Eight of the students described their need for an environment for using English for communication to practice the English language, learn to listen to others who speak English, and learn how to pronounce the English words. The participants complained that they



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did not have adequate time to speak the language in class and did not interact with others outside of the classroom. Lai (2015) confirms students' argument for the need to practice English outside of the classroom because it complements what they are learning in school. In addition, Vygotsky's (1987) sociocultural theory indicates that language acquisition depends on social interaction with society. Therefore, students need to interact with fellow students and their community to learn the language.

Four students also mentioned that when they talk with other people who are not native speakers, they usually do not understand what is said because they are used to listening to erroneous pronunciation from non-native English teachers. The importance of proper pronunciation has been discussed in some studies because mispronunciation could lead to miscommunication due to distortion of words (Tsojon & Aji, 2014).

Teacher's Methods of Teaching

Teaching strategies are important in the language classroom. Four students wanted better teaching strategies, especially engaging in more classroom activities for learning English. The teacher used teacher-centered methods. The students were unable to ask questions and did not inform the teacher of their lack of understanding. Furthermore, it looks like the teacher did not assess students' comprehension. The students felt that the teacher was unaware of the students' lack of understanding. Teachers' awareness of students' problems in learning is essential. Mascolo (2009) proposed that teachers' use of teacher-centered teaching methods would reduce students' chances of using the language and affect their initiative and enthusiasm in language learning.

It is essential to point out that not all students had the same perspective about the teacher's methods. While some of the students felt they needed the teacher to use better teaching methods, two students discussed the teacher's positive influence on their English learning. What students enjoyed were the American movies they watched in class. These movies helped students learn new words and the American culture. These two students may have been comfortable using their particular learning styles to acquire English (Gardner, 2011).

Question 2: Are there differences in male and female students' experiences when learning English?

Although students were divided over the issue of gender, seven students indicated that gender does not play a role in language acquisition because it depends on student motivation and working hard to learn. Douglas and Alemanne (2007) confirm this finding. They



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argue that all students, regardless of gender, can learn the language if they are determined to learn. They further stated that no matter how well a course is designed, students will not learn anything unless they put reasonable effort into the learning process. On the contrary, literature also supports the three students who stated that gender does make a difference. Główka (2014) shows that females are open to learning other linguistic forms in her study. They can speak a new language without using languages mixed with words from the first language.

Question 3: What effect do the local Chinese languages have on learning English as a second language?

The data analysis regarding the effect of the Chinese language on learning English was inconclusive because only one student came from the South and was skilled in speaking the Mandarin language from the North. Liang (2019) and Derteding (2017) explain that though the provinces are different, there is not much difference between the North and the South. They all face the same problem of using epenthetic vowels—the insertion of a consonant or vowel for better pronunciation.

In responding to whether the Chinese language helps students learn English or hinders their acquisition, some students pointed out that it helps. Students think that translanguaging (using both English and Chinese in the same sentence) helps them make sense of sentences. In addition, translanguaging helps them to master the language quickly. Fang and Liu (2020) affirm that translanguaging is an accepted learning strategy in China because it enables students to effectively comprehend and use the English language. Furthermore, Shaotong (2017) states that students can make full use of the characteristics of Chinese learning by analyzing Chinese grammar and comparing the differences between Chinese and English to improve their English learning.

Two students, however, discussed how the first language (Chinese) was interfering with the learning of English. To learn English, they had to translate first into their language, making it difficult for them to progress in their acquisition of English. This finding is consistent with Mukhopadhyay's (2018), who found that second language assimilation is a problem for learners due to the dominance of their mother tongue.

Students' Motivation.

Motivation is a significant factor in learning a language. The analysis of the data showed that all the students had instrumental motivation to pass national examinations. One student



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had the integrative motivation to learn English and use it if she traveled. These findings are in keeping with motivation theories by Gardner (2001), Deci and Ryan (2008) regarding language learning. Gardner (2001) believed that integrative motivation refers to a positive attitude towards a second language and a desire to approach and acquire a language. Instrumental motivation is to learn a language for extrinsic rewards. On the contrary, one student was not motivated to learn English because he did not believe he would use English after finishing school

Parents' Support.

A significant finding in this study was that parents were involved in encouraging their children to learn English. Gao (2006) stated that parents in China indirectly collaborate with teachers and have other strategies for encouraging their children to learn the English language. Three of the students discussed how their parents encouraged them. Their parents attached learning English to employability. Unfortunately, some parents are unable to encourage their children to learn because of their low level of education. One unmotivated student had parents who did not attend college. Literature reveals that parents who have low literacy levels do not know how to help their children to learn English or participate in their education. (Poyraz, 2017). Zhou (2020) also found out that parents' educational level plays a role in a student's language acquisition.

Conclusion

This study explored the language learning experiences of ten Chinese Gongzhuling No. 1 Middle School students. The data analysis shows that Chinese students' most common language acquisition challenges were grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. In addition, students discussed pedagogical issues regarding poor teachers' English teaching strategies that discouraged active learning of the English language. Students also pointed out the lack of environment for practicing speaking and pronouncing the English words to improve their language acquisition. Other significant findings dwelt on the parents' support, the role of gender in learning English, and students' motivation for learning English.

Recommendations

The findings show the need for teacher development to improve their language teaching skills, to diversify their teaching strategies to include student-centered teaching methods and real-life activities to allow students to practice what they are learning. Education



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