



# Challenges that Chinese Post-graduate Students Face as EFL Learners in an English University

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## Abstract

The majority of time spent using English is in the classroom, while outside the classroom, most communication occurs in the local language. In some countries with English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, the local language is still used for teaching. This paper focuses on the perceptions of postgraduate students in Chinese universities regarding English as a Foreign Language (EFL), including whether they have encountered difficulties thus far and what these difficulties are during the process of learning English. Whether the teacher should explain grammar instruction or use the student-teacher conversation approach in the EFL classroom? Data were collected through questionnaires, literature review, and other methods. These difficulties fall into two categories: difficulties in listening, reading, and writing, and difficulties in computer operation and classroom activities. For the second category, the solution is to provide teachers with the opportunity to teach students additional computer skills and integrate more engaging social activities into Chinese English classrooms.

## Keywords

EFL, Chinese postgraduate students, Newcastle University, teaching skills, communicative and non-communicative activities

## 1. Research Background

In recent years, curiosity about whether English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has substantially helped Chinese university students with their English has grown considerably. Interestingly, Chinese scholars point out that mandated EFL programmes and the tension between EFL and the local language are gradually emerging in universities (Kong & Wei, 2019). Specifically, the majority of time for the use of English is in the classroom and the majority of time outside the classroom is spent communicating in the local language, and even in some countries for EFL classrooms the local language is still used for teaching (Coe, R. et al., 2021). As a result, a conflict between the use of English and the local language in the EFL classroom is emerging. Moreover, Kong also states that EFL is now facing a change in the workplace of teaching and learning from face-to-face learning to online learning, and a change in technology from board writing to the use of computer operations (Kong & Wei, 2019). Therefore, our research focuses on the perceptions of postgraduate students in Chinese universities about EFL, including whether they have encountered difficulties so far and what these difficulties are. In addition, EFL students can benefit from our research and gain valuable experience.

## 2. Impact on EFL Students

Previous research on EFL essays has presented findings on personal, social, and cultural factors. Furthermore, previous research on EFL texts can be divided into two categories. On the one hand, the research of EFL texts focuses on

communicative activities. On the other hand, the research of some EFL essays focuses on non-communicative language activities. Li stated that EFL classes indeed have an influence on improving the development of students (Li, H., 2022).

## **2.1 Personal Factors**

Previous research on EFL classrooms has focused on the personal gains of EFL students and the anxiety experienced by EFL students in EFL classrooms. For example, Alrabai states that the EFL programme facilitates EFL students and teachers to work together to design lesson plans, which is advantageous for increasing student autonomy and creativity in designing lesson plans and students are more likely to achieve a sense of engagement by expressing their ideas about lesson design (Alrabai, 2021). Rao concludes that most participants preferred non-communicative activities to communicative activities. The reason is that non-communicative activity is more in line with traditional teaching habits and that communicative activities cost more wealth and time in terms of designing and setting up the environment, which can be a burden for EFL students who are poor (Rao, 2002).

## **2.2 Social Factors**

Liu used interviews and surveys, observations, and reflective journals to gather information on the varying levels of anxiety among EFL students in the speaking classroom, concluding that the most anxious classroom activity was class discussion (Liu, 2006). Horwitz suggests that poor language learning is a consequence rather than a cause of language anxiety, which is due to changes in content, classroom environment, and teaching style (Horwitz, 2001). Alhassan expressed EFL students' problems with vocabulary and pronunciation, excessive focus on communication fluency, excessive focus on grammar and sentence structure, and lack of confidence in their English (Alhassan, 2021). For the classroom environment, videos are gradually replacing the traditional book-based classroom, and the content of EFL books is more focused on the use of everyday English language rather than limited to memorization and recitation of words. However, Alwehaibi (2015) suggests that EFL students make positive progress in academic achievement and language learning due to the integration of the use of computers and other electronic devices in teaching and learning (Alwehaibi, 2015). Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether the use of more technological products is definitely beneficial to the EFL classroom. The study will also conduct follow-up interviews with volunteers to further understand the sources of classroom anxiety and attitudes towards technology in the EFL classroom.

## **2.3 Culture**

Jinxu suggests in her article that the new blended learning (i.e., a combination of online and offline learning) is beneficial to students' knowledge of cultures other than English, such as cultural exchange, religious beliefs, and table manners. Although each article discusses a different perspective, almost all of the authors use the same data collection methods and each article reporting on EFL classrooms can be divided into two categories of classroom activities.

## **2.4 Communicative and Non-communicative Activities**

In 2002, Rao studied students' perceptions of communicative and non-communicative activities in the EFL classroom and concluded, after analyzing the data, that students preferred to use non-communicative items in the classroom rather than communicative items. However, there is also a negative impact on the way teachers use only communicative activities in EFL lessons (Rao, 2002).

Ma also suggests that some students are more inclined to listen and think carefully in class rather than communicate with each other all the time. Ma also showed that some students were more inclined to listen and think carefully in class rather than interact with each other all the time (Ma, 2021). These personal and socio-cultural factors continue to contribute to low proficiency in students' reluctance to communicate in English and their anxiety about speaking in formal presentations or answering teacher questions due to low academic levels. Because of low academic proficiency students are not confident in their oral presentation, they feel a degree of anxiety when answering questions or giving presentations in class. Then, as their speaking anxiety was not answered by the teacher, the speaking anxiety of the low academic level students also increased. The limitations of almost all previous articles examining EFL in the classroom are related to the lack of representativeness of the sample (An, Z., Gan, Z. & Wang, C., 2020). As many EFL articles use only interviews. In other words, EFL students need to demonstrate a student-centered ethos in the classroom as well as a certain level of interaction between students and teachers. Therefore, our project focuses on the

challenges and difficulties that EFL students now face and how EFL students deal with these difficulties and challenges.

### 3. Research Method

#### 3.1 Study Design

The participants in the formal questionnaire were 30 Chinese EFL postgraduate students from Newcastle University. For the first part of the questionnaire, 30 questionnaires were collected from students of different majors. As these students had both experiences of EFL in China and had studied in a native English-speaking country, they could also provide additional advice and assistance to prospective EFL students in understanding the differences between native and non-native EFL. The first uses a Likert scale to answer closed-ended questions (this form can be found at the end of this paper). For the analysis of the quantitative data, the researcher will first set up a Likert scale, and then divide the answers of the questionnaire according to the set data. For the setting of the Likert scale, the first one is where the researcher separates the different answers with the answers strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree. the participants can answer the questions of the online questionnaire. The questionnaire takes about 10 to 15 minutes, and the second part of the interview takes about 25 to 35 minutes. For the first part of the questionnaire, the researchers will collect data via social media applications such as WhatsApp, WeChat, and others.

### 4. Descriptive Findings

#### 4.1 Descriptive Result of Questionnaire

Table 1. Basic information on data samples

Question	Category	Number of people	Percentage/%
What is your gender	Male	11	30%
	Female	22	67%
In what country did you complete your undergraduate study	China	26	76.47%
	UK	8	23.53%
How long have you been studying English as an EFL	1-3 years	10	29.41%
	5-7 years	5	14.7%
	Over 9 years	19	55.88%
How long have been studying at English University	1-3 years	29	85.29%
	3-5 years	3	8.82%
	5-7 years	1	2.94%
	Over9 years	1	2.94%
What challenges do you face as an EFL learner in an English-speaking University? (Multiple Choice)	Listening	22	
	Speaking	21	
	Reading	12	
	Writing	16	
	Different culture	11	
	Psychological	14	
Have you faced many challenges as an EFL student	Agree	16	47.06%
	Neither agree nor disagree	5	14.71%
	Strongly agree	13	38.24%
What English support have you been offered at Newcastle University (Multiple Choice)	Listening class	19	
	Speaking class	21	
	Reading class	17	
	Writing class	22	
	Learning from the after-school	9	
		8	
What English support have you used or attended? (Multiple Choice)	Listening class	14	
	Speaking class	17	
	Reading class	16	
	Writing class	21	
How helpful was the support you received from the university as an EFL student	Learning from the after-school	11	
	Neither helpful nor unhelpful	7	20.59%
	Somewhat helpful	12	35.29%
	Somewhat unhelpful	1	2.94%
	Very helpful	14	41.18%

## 5. Discussion

The first issue of the study was the challenges faced by Chinese postgraduate students as EFL learners in English-speaking universities. Questions 9 and 10 of the questionnaire and question 1 of the interviews are of interest during the study. The quantitative study revealed that EFL Chinese postgraduate students still face the same problems in UK universities that EFL Chinese postgraduate students face in China, specifically, speaking and listening problems or writing problems are always present, as shown in Figure 4.4. Therefore, the challenges faced by Chinese postgraduate students as EFL learners in English universities divided into two categories, one is personal learning problems i.e., listening, reading, and writing problems and the other is external problems i.e. computer problems, learning activities, etc.

Secondly, in this paragraph, we focus on analyzing the reason for personal learning problems, which include the causes of listening, speaking, reading, and writing problems for EFL students. Firstly, in terms of environmental factors. Questions 5 and 6 of the questionnaire and question 2 of the interview deserve careful attention. According to the results of question 5 of the questionnaire, while 18 (55%) of the EFL postgraduate students have been studying EFL for more than 9 years, the results of question 6 show that 28 (85%) of the EFL students have lived in an English-speaking country for only 1 to 3 years. Therefore, on the one hand, because of the relatively short period spent in an English-speaking country, it is likely that the problems faced by EFL Chinese postgraduate students studying in an English-speaking country are due to a lack of adaptation to a new culture and society. This finding is also in line with question 10 of the questionnaire, which showed that a total of 24 participants selected different culture and education problems and psychological anxiety problems as the problems they faced in English-speaking countries. On the other hand, after arriving in an English-speaking country, 80.8% of the participants indicated that they had made some progress in English during their first year of study in the UK, according to questions 12 and question 13, and question 15 of the questionnaire. Further, question 16 showed that 75.8% of the participants indicated that the EFL course offered by Newcastle University was somewhat helpful in learning EFL. Thus, compared to Chinese EFL postgraduate students who have been studying EFL in China for over 9 years but still have many listening and speaking problems, one to three years of study at an English language school is a significant improvement for EFL students learning English. Furthermore, in question 3 of the interview, the participants also indicated that being in an English-speaking country, where everyone and everything must speak English, has invisibly improved their English. Thus, even though Chinese EFL students have studied in China for more than nine years in EFL courses, they still have problems with listening and speaking, yet these problems have improved significantly after only one to three years of study in an English-speaking country.

In terms of personal factors, the approach and learning strategies of EFL students are very important. Question 15 inside the questionnaire indicated that nine participants would use the learning app and 11 participants would participate in after-school activities to learn. The use of the learning app would adequately train listening and reading skills, and participation in after-school learning activities would improve speaking skills. These activities and learning apps can improve the listening, speaking, and reading skills of EFL students, and question 16 of the interview also indicated that 39.4% of the participants thought that the options in question 15 were very useful in improving EFL skills. Similarly, in the last question of the interview, participants advised that it is important to improve all aspects of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in an EFL course, rather than just focusing on one part of it. Also, EFL participants can make more use of learning apps to improve their deficiencies.

For social factors, which are mainly focused on questions 6 to 8 of the interview. Firstly, all participants in question 6 indicated that they preferred communicative activities in class, i.e., student-student interaction, and student-teacher interaction, to non-communicative activities, rather than the teacher being present for the whole lesson giving lectures, explaining exercises, etc.

## 6. Suggestion

In conclusion, there are two reasons why Chinese postgraduate students face problems with listening, speaking, reading, and computer use as EFL learners in English universities. In terms of personal factors, it is because of the different and inappropriate learning methods and study habits that cause EFL learning difficulties, and environmental factors, it is because there are fewer English-speaking environments in China, which is not conducive to the usual English training for EFL students. For social factors, the traditional activity style in Chinese EFL classrooms is non-communicative, but the traditional activity style is communicative. In the next paragraph, this study will further

describe how to deal with the problems that EFL Chinese students face in their lessons.

In terms of social factors, these include the use of computers and the setting of teaching activities. As far as teaching activities are concerned, they are divided into communicative and non-communicative activities. Based on the data collected from the questionnaires and interviews, it is clear that Chinese EFL students prefer communicative activities, *i.e.*, student-student interaction and student-teacher interaction. Firstly, question 13 of the questionnaire indicated that 8 of the EFL students use technology such as computers to improve their EFL skills, and question 15 indicated that 9 of the participants regularly use EFL learning apps. In contrast, there were many activities that they enjoyed and were impressed by during their years in the UK, such as the expert cloak and classroom debates. However, for the majority of EFL students who have studied in China for more than 9 years, it is not the communicative activities that are used. They receive non-communicative activities in the classroom. Therefore, EFL students are more likely to choose communicative activities in the classroom.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper examines the difficulties faced by Chinese graduate students majoring in English and concludes that these difficulties fall into two categories, difficulties in listening, reading, and writing, and difficulties in computer operation and classroom activities. For the second category, however, the solution is to give teachers the opportunity to teach students more computer skills and incorporate more interesting social activities into Chinese English classrooms.

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