



The Journal of Asia TEFL

<http://journal.asiatefl.org/>

e-ISSN 2466-1511 © 2004 AsiaTEFL.org. All rights reserved.



A Qualitative Study on Chinese ESL Students' Perceptions about English Language Teaching and Learning in an Australian Context

Jie Fan

Macquarie University, Australia

Introduction

In recent decades, the internationalization of higher education has become an important global phenomenon. Australia, as an attractive study destination for international students, accommodates a large proportion of this cohort in its institutions of higher education. Notably, Chinese students make up the largest share of international enrollments at Australian universities (Hughes, 2022), thereby making China a major source country of international students. While studying overseas may generate intercultural learning opportunities, research focused on East Asian students has reported that language barriers constitute a big challenge to their adaptation to Western learning environments (Lee et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2015). Because students' previous educational backgrounds and learning experiences are likely to influence their learning in the host country, it is necessary to identify their academic difficulties and discover their beliefs and expectations about language learning experiences in the host society (Barkhuizen, 1998). This would help educators develop better pedagogies and strategies to facilitate international students' participation and integration in Australian education. To this end, the present study aims to investigate how Chinese ESL students perceive English language teaching and learning in the Australian context and what difficulties they may face in their English studies. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are Chinese ESL students' perceptions of English language teaching and learning in Australia?
2. What difficulties do Chinese students face in learning English?

Literature Review

Research on English Language Learners' Perceptions of Communicative Language Teaching and the Grammar Translation Method

A review of the literature suggests that studies of learner beliefs about communicative language teaching (CLT) and the grammar translation method (GTM) have mostly been conducted in cross-cultural settings (Durrani, 2016; Kavoshian et al., 2013; Mohammadi & Yousefi, 2019). Learners' perceptions differ across cultural groups and largely depend on ethnic and situational factors. However, research focusing on the variety and uniformity of intra-cultural groups' perceptions reveals that the intra-cultural group variation



in learner beliefs is more associated with individual characteristics, such as age, language-learning context, and instructional practices (Horwitz, 1999). Despite these findings, there is a need to understand how language learners' perceptions change with their learning environment and learning experience. A comparative study conducted by Saito and Ebsworth (2004) that examined the variance in beliefs between college-level Japanese ESL and EFL learners, discovered that ESL learners were more favorable to classroom participation and the learner-centered approach than were EFL learners. These differences were, to some extent, attributed to the entirely different teaching contexts and instructional practices. Similarly, in a study conducted among Korean ESL learners in the U.S., Mitsui (2009) investigated the effect of overseas learning experiences on language learning. According to the findings, the participants showed positive attitudes toward communicative activities such as oral presentations and group work. As reflected in the above studies, overseas learning experiences have a great impact on the perceptions of learners, in particular of East Asian students from Confucian Heritage Culture traditions.

While the examination of the CLT method in meaningful contexts is encouraging, research into its connections with grammar is equally important. In recent years, there has been a tendency to explore the possibilities of grammar instruction in communicative activities. For example, Subramaniam and Khan (2013) examined the effectiveness of the integration of explicit contrastive grammar instruction into the CLT approach among Malay ESL learners. The results showed that learners viewed grammar instruction within CLT as an effective approach that helped them to achieve fluency and accuracy in language use. In a similar study conducted in Indonesia, Fithriani (2018) used a questionnaire to look into EFL learners' perceptions of communicative game-based grammar instruction. According to the findings, learners expressed more preference for this innovation because it created an enjoyable and motivating learning environment.

Based on the above inter-cultural and intra-cultural comparative studies, learners' perceptions about CLT and GTM are generally context specific. Individual factors such as age, cultural background, L2 proficiency, and learning aptitude may account for the complexity and dynamics of learner beliefs and influence learners' preferences for particular types of teaching pedagogies (Horwitz, 1999). Nevertheless, how Chinese ESL learners respond to the two entirely different approaches in the Australian context is of interest to me and demands further exploration in my present research.

Language Learning Difficulties Experienced by International Students

Language difficulties are the major barrier that influences international students' academic study and cultural adaptation to the Western learning environment. The specific issues identified in the literature include problems with oral communication, academic writing, learning style, and the comprehension of lectures (Ai, 2017; Lee et al., 2013; Park et al., 2017; Rao, 2016). For example, in a quantitative study conducted among 182 international students from three Australian universities, Park et al. (2017) discovered that the main issue experienced by most L2 tertiary students was accented English, which resulted in their miscommunication and lesser engagement in learning activities. Research conducted by Wong (2004) and Wong et al. (2015) moved a step further, finding that language difficulties encountered by Asian international students resulted from their prior exposure to different teaching and learning styles and from a cultural clash between their past and present expectations. Hence, language limitations and students' previous educational experiences, to a large extent, contribute to their language difficulties. These difficulties can impact their ability to cope with academic demands in Western contexts and to become acclimatized to a new academic environment (Lee et al., 2013).

Generally, a growing body of research suggests that L2 learners hold varied beliefs and attitudes toward CLT and GTM as a result of individual differences in terms of educational contexts and language proficiency. However, there has been little research that identifies the potential causes of their perceptions and that examines how the dynamics of cultural change shape their perceptions of teaching and learning. In spite of the identification of a range of linguistic challenges, further research is required to understand

the connections between their prior educational experiences and current language learning difficulties in the Western learning context.

Methodology

The present study sought to follow a qualitative paradigm to gain an in-depth understanding of Chinese ESL students' perceptions of the Australian teaching and learning phenomena; the interviews could make the elicited data more thorough and individualized.

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted at an English language institution in Sydney, Australia. Ten Chinese students who were enrolled in an English language course participated in the research. According to the demographic information provided by the participants, their IELTS scores range from 4.5 to 7. This disparity suggests that they may have varying levels of English language proficiency.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews to gain detailed insight into the learners' perceptions. The participants were interviewed in Chinese so that they could fully communicate their ideas. After the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, a copy of the transcript was sent to each participant for verification. Finally, the transcripts were translated into English for analysis. The data was broken into two major groups in response to the research questions (i.e., learners' perceptions and learning difficulties) and was organized into tables to help direct my thinking.

An inductive approach was adopted to analyze the data. In this way, patterns and themes gradually emerged from the data. This framework yielded useful concepts and guided my search for potential coding categories.

Two major themes corresponding to the two research questions were finally determined: Chinese students' perceptions and learning difficulties. Three salient sub-themes regarding the students' perceptions also emerged: comparison between learning experiences in China and Australia, attitudes toward communicative activities, and attitudes toward grammar activities. Under each sub-theme, the categories and evidence identified in the transcripts were then sorted and listed. The same procedure was followed for the theme of learning difficulties. The tables below summarize the themes, sub-themes, and examples of excerpts.

Results

Q1. What are Chinese ESL Students' Perceptions of English Language Teaching and Learning in Australia?

TABLE 1
Students' Perceptions about Learning Experiences in China and Australia

	Examples of excerpts
1. Learning aims	1) <i>English instruction in Australia is aimed at developing students' English competency, especially their communication skills.</i> 2) <i>English study in China was oriented toward exams. Although I can be trained to achieve higher scores, my communication skills may not reach a high level.</i>
2. Teacher/learner roles	3) <i>I enjoy participating in group activities in Australian classrooms. However, this may be impossible in the big classrooms that are common in China. Chinese teachers are normally not trained in this area, and we are used to listening to the teacher passively.</i> 4) <i>I enjoy the self-exploration process because I always have the desire to explore unknown fields of study. My enthusiasm for learning in Australia is stronger than ever.</i>
3. Teaching and learning activities	5) <i>It's boring to attend English classes in China because the teaching activities focused on grammar exercises.</i> 6) <i>My English proficiency has developed in Australia. I've benefited a lot from the presentations, group discussions, and writing.</i>
4. Assessment	7) <i>The exams we took in China focused more on drills, recitations, and examination techniques.</i> 8) <i>I like the one-minute speech in the final exam at the center. This speech requires you to think of a topic and present your ideas within a very limited time. It was a challenging task, and I felt like I was on a roller coaster. However, when completing the speech, I had a sense of fulfillment.</i>
5. Connections between the two learning experiences	9) <i>Although learning by rote is discouraged, it has enabled me to accumulate a large number of words and phrases through drills and recitations. This is very helpful for my ability to use English expressions.</i>

The results presented in Table 1 displayed a marked difference in learners' learning experiences between China and Australia. In terms of learning aims, the majority of participants considered passing exams their ultimate goal in learning English in China. Conversely, English study in Australia is focused on language use rather than exam success. Such differences have resulted in differing teaching and learning activities and assessments in these countries. It appears that the participants had favorable attitudes toward Australian teaching pedagogy and the forms of assessment they took at the language center. Concerning the teacher/learner roles, the participants believed that Chinese teachers are perceived as knowledge transmitters, and students are deemed passive knowledge receptors. Contrarily, teachers in Australia tend to perform the roles of facilitators. They use scaffolding strategies to help learners reach the zone of proximal development. Despite the role difference, most respondents perceived themselves as active classroom participants, rather than the "obedient passive listeners" described in most of the previous studies (Gu & Maley, 2008). In addition, they stated that their prior learning experiences had both facilitated and constrained their language learning in Australia. Although the grammatical knowledge acquired in China is useful for their current studies in Australia, the form-based classroom activities and exams, to some extent, have negatively impacted their communication competency instead.

TABLE 2
Learners' Attitudes toward CLT

	Examples of excerpts
CLT activities are preferred	10) <i>I enjoyed group discussions because I could get to know some classmates from other countries and learn about their cultures and languages.</i> 11) <i>I enjoyed short excursions because I could explore local culture and communicate with Aussies.</i> 12) <i>I think that to make communication more effective, one needs to overcome shyness. Initially, I feel it is hard to go beyond that, but when I taste its sweetness, I'll become more confident and just want to go for it.</i>
CLT activities are not preferred	13) <i>Because most of my classmates are Chinese, we can easily go off topic and speak in our mother tongue.</i> 14) <i>Everyone needs to contribute to the group discussion. If one is selected to represent the group, others may passively participate in the activity.</i>

The findings unveiled in Table 2 indicate that most of the participants had favorable attitudes about communicative activities -- such as presentations, group work, and excursions -- because these activities enabled them to develop communicative competence and become more acquainted with Aussie accents and cultures. Despite the benefits, two participants presented a critique of group discussions, such as people communicating in their mother tongue and digressions in discussions.

TABLE 3
Students' Attitudes toward Grammar Activities

	Examples of excerpts
A preference for grammar learning through games	15) <i>Learning grammar by playing games helped me memorize new words and learn grammar rules.</i> 16) <i>Learning grammar through games is great fun. It has increased my motivation to learn English.</i>
A preference for grammar learning in other modalities	17) <i>I prefer grammar to be taught in combination with writing, such as how to use modality and conjunctions in essays. It is easy to follow.</i>
Less interest in learning grammar	18) <i>I have less interest in learning grammar. However, it's necessary to learn it; after all, grammar is the foundation of communication.</i>
A lack of interest in learning grammar	19) <i>I'm not interested in grammar at all. It is very boring.</i>

The data revealed in Table 3 suggest that the participants presented diverging beliefs about grammar activities. However, most of them showed favorable attitudes toward the grammar instruction they received at the center because they preferred grammar instruction in combination with writing or in communicative activities rather than being taught in isolation. Such innovation not only sustained their interest and motivation but also improved their writing skills. Nevertheless, a smaller number of students expressed less interest but admitted that grammar was an integral part of English learning.

Q2. What Difficulties Do Chinese Students Face in Learning English?

TABLE 4
Students' Perceived English Learning Difficulties

	Examples of excerpts
Difficulties in academic writing	20) <i>I feel uncomfortable with academic writing because it requires good analytical and research skills. In China, for exams, I was only instructed to recite fancy expressions and imitate writing samples. Therefore, I have no ideas as to how to use references, paraphrase sentences, and write essays more academically.</i>
	21) <i>The Chinese language emphasizes semantic connections, while English focuses on syntactic devices. My thoughts and expressions are always influenced by my mother tongue when it comes to writing.</i>
	22) <i>I get confused about the circumstances in which formal and informal language should be used... I have difficulty differentiating subjective words from objective ones.</i>
Difficulties in communication	23) <i>I paid more attention to word form and accuracy when speaking English. This undoubtedly slowed down my speech and limited its fluency.</i>
	24) <i>When talking with locals, I could hardly follow them if they spoke quickly.</i>
Difficulties with independent learning	25) <i>English learning in Australia requires high degrees of autonomy and self-exploration. Because I've been used to being spoon-fed, it takes time to undergo a complete transformation.</i>

The results presented in Table 4 indicate that the learning difficulties raised by the participants are mainly associated with academic writing, oral communication, understanding the Australian accent, and autonomy. Writing presented a major issue. Students generally found it challenging to learn Australian discourse conventions because of cultural differences in perceiving textual ownership, cross-linguistic influences, and confusion about formal and informal language. Speaking and listening were considered less difficult. The participants expressed frustration with their inadequate communicative competence due to the focus on word form and accuracy and unfamiliarity with the Australian accent. Reading was the least demanding activity. Only one student raised issues with reading. In addition, the participants reported challenges in independently seeking knowledge and going beyond their comfort zones. These difficulties are partly related to their transition from passive reception to active and autonomous learning.

Discussion

The present study examined Chinese students' perceptions of English language study in the Australian context and the learning difficulties they commonly encountered. According to the findings, the participants appeared well aware of the contrast between EFL and ESL contexts, and they gradually established their views and perceptions of the host learning culture. Their responses indicate that they were willing to be active classroom participants (as shown in Excerpts 3 and 4) and take on a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning (Excerpt 4). This is in line with Littlewood's (2000) findings, which reveal that the stereotype of Asian students as "obedient listeners" by no means reflects the roles they would like to adopt in class. Furthermore, the participants considered that their prior learning experiences both facilitated and impeded their language learning in Australia. In terms of facilitation, most thought that the grammatical knowledge and vocabulary acquired in China was an important step in building their knowledge and developing their abilities (Excerpts 9). This echoes the findings of Pratt et al. (1999) that Chinese learners view it necessary to acquire fundamental knowledge before advancing in other skills and exploring creativity. Nevertheless, focusing on memorization and recitation, to some extent, discouraged their growth in creativity and ingenuity.

In addition, the participants displayed highly positive attitudes toward the communicative approach and manifested a particular interest in and motivation toward Western pedagogy. This suggests that their primary concern was to improve their communicative competence so as to survive in an English-speaking country. Although the learners showed lower motivation for grammar knowledge, they generally

acknowledged its value and importance for their current learning, and mostly preferred grammar instruction embedded in communicative practice.

The results also reveal that participants' learning difficulties mainly occurred in the areas of academic writing (Excerpts 20, 21, and 22), oral communication (Excerpts 23 and 24), cultural differences (Excerpts 20 and 21), and autonomous learning (Excerpts 25). Of these issues, writing and communication were particularly common in the responses. The results support those of Lee et al. (2013), who found that writing and speaking are the greatest concerns facing international students.

No one starts a new course with a blank slate. Most learners are probably affected by what they already know (Sawir, 2005). As reflected in the data, issues with grammar use and autonomy in learning are due in part to the participants' prior teaching and learning styles. Although learners have good knowledge of grammar rules and principles, they may lack the competence to use language for meaningful communication; being accustomed to the traditional didactic and teacher-centered approach, they are less capable in critical thinking and problem-solving and in taking more control and responsibility for their own learning. In addition, cultural differences in writing represent another obstacle to the participants; the originality and creativity emphasized in the Western tradition may conflict with the imitative cultural practices valued in the Chinese context. Empirical research suggests that there are prominent differences between cultures in terms of rhetorical conventions, cultural schemata, and writing expectations (Hyland, 2003). Therefore, it is a tough job for L2 learners to improve their literacy skills. In conclusion, the impact of prior learning experiences, coupled with cultural differences and language limitations, was seen as partly contributing to the participants' difficulties in learning.

Conclusion

This research has sought to understand how Chinese students feel about Western pedagogy and how their perceptions change as a result of learning experiences and teaching contexts. The results suggest that with increasing familiarity with Western teaching contexts, the participants gradually followed the rules of mainstream culture and became receptive to the cultural values and teaching philosophies of their new academic environment. Being aware of the pressing need to survive in an English-speaking country, they exhibited highly positive attitudes about CLT and mostly preferred grammar instruction within communicative practice. Nevertheless, the participants experienced challenges in terms of communication, academic writing, and autonomy in learning. To some degree, these difficulties are influenced by their prior exposure to traditional teaching methods and learning styles. Hence, necessary interventions need to be considered in both their home country (China) and in the country where they are currently studying (Australia) to assist learners in the course of their academic adaptation.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by Australian Commonwealth Government-funded Research Training Program Scholarship.

The Author

Jie Fan graduated with Master of Research from Macquarie University, Australia. Her research interests include language teaching and learning, applied linguistics, and teacher education.

Department of Linguistics

Faculty of Medicine, Health and Human Sciences
Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia
Mobile: +0061 434276836
Email: katiefan100@gmail.com

References

- Ai, B. (2017). The communication patterns of Chinese students with their lecturers in an Australian university. *Educational Studies*, 43(4), 484-496. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2017.1293507>
- Barkhuizen, G. P. (1998). Discovering learners' perceptions of ESL classroom teaching/learning activities in South African context. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(1), 85-108. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587903>
- Durrani, H. (2016). Attitudes of undergraduates towards grammar translation method and communicative language teaching in EFL context: A case study of SBK Women's University Quetta, Pakistan. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 7(4), 167-172. <https://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.7n.4p.167>
- Fithriani, R. (2018). Communicative game-based learning in EFL grammar class: Suggested activities and students' perception. *JEELS*, 5(2), 171-188.
- Gu, Q., & Maley, A. (2008). Changing places: A study of Chinese students in the UK. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 8(4), 224-245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708470802303025>
- Horwitz, E. K. (1999). Cultural and situational influences on foreign language learners' beliefs about language learning: A review of BALLI studies. *System*, 27(4), 557-576.
- Hughes, C. (2022). *Number of Chinese student enrolments in Australia 2012-2021, by education sector*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/430276/number-of-chinese-students-in-australia-by-education-sector/>
- Hyland, K. (2003). *Second language writing*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kavoshian, S., Medadian, G., & Lorzadeh, M. (2013). Iranian language learners' conceptions of the ideal English lesson: Form-focused or communicative. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 3(8), 1352-1359. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-019-0068-4>
- Lee, B., Farruggia, S., & Brown, G. (2013). Academic difficulties encountered by East Asian International university students in New Zealand. *Education Research and Development*, 32(6), 915 – 931. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.806444>
- Littlewood, W. (2000). Do Asian students really want to listen and obey? *ELT Journal*, 54 (1), 31-35.
- Mitsui, N. (2009). *Accommodating CLT in Korean EFL classrooms* (Unpublished Master thesis). available from ProQuest Theses database (Record No. 9798209660835)
- Mohammadi, M., & Yousefi, M. (2019). Iranian EFL teachers and learners' perceptions of grammar Instruction and corrective feedback. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 4 (8). 1-17.
- Park, E., Klieve, H., Tsurutani, C., & Harte, W. (2017). International students' accented English-Communication difficulties and developed strategies. *Cogent Education*, 4(1), 1314651. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2017.1314651>
- Pratt, D. D., Kelly, M., & Wong, W. S. S. (1999). Chinese conceptions of 'effective teaching' in Hong Kong: Towards culturally sensitive evaluation of teaching. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 18(4), 241-258.
- Rao, P. (2016). Learning challenges and preferred pedagogies of international students: A perspective from the USA. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 31(7). <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-01-2016-0001>
- Saito, H., & Ebsworth, M. E. (2004). Seeing English language teaching and learning through the eyes of Japanese EFL and ESL students. *Foreign Language Annals*, 37(1), 111-124.
- Sawir, E. (2005). Language difficulties of international students in Australia: The effects of prior learning experience. *International Education Journal*, 6(5), 567- 580.

- Subramaniam, R., & Khan, M.H. (2013). Explicit grammar instruction in communicative language teaching: A study of the use of quantifiers. *Malaysian Journal of ELT Research*, 9 (1), 43-73.
- Wong, G., Cooper, B. J., & Dellaportas, S. (2015). Chinese students' perceptions of the teaching in an Australian accounting programme—An exploratory study. *Accounting Education: An International Journal*, 24 (4), 318-340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639284.2015.1050678>
- Wong, J. K. (2004). Are the learning styles of Asian internationals culturally or contextually based? *International Education Journal*, 4(4), 154 -166.

(Received June 30, 2022; Revised October 30, 2022; Accepted December 10, 2022)