Chinese International Students' Perceptions of their Language Issues in U.S. Universities: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Many students from China in U.S. universities have revealed their difficulties in using English in both communicative and academic contexts. Their difficulties have been a concern in the fields of academic practices and research studies. Accordingly, the current study was developed, to understand and support Chinese students in the U.S. universities. It compared two unpublished exploratory case studies conducted in two universities, which investigated difficulties faced by Chinese students via interviews. Through multi-faceted analysis of participants' perceptions of their language issues, we argue that English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses or similar language courses should be more geared to academic writing and speaking for Chinese newcomers. The findings provide insights for reforming the curriculum of language courses in U.S. universities.

<u>**Keywords**</u>: L1-L2 negative transfer, syntax, morphology, pragmatics, phonology, reading

In the 2013-2014 academic year, 274,439 students from Mainland China accounted for 31% of the total international student population in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2014). Students from China have been the largest population in the U.S. universities for years with rapid growth (Institute of International Education, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014). These students need to use English for daily communicative conversations and academic performances in U.S. universities. These universities have developed various language courses to help non-native-English speaking students transit smoothly to academic system in the U.S. However, most of the current empirical studies were conducted from instructors' perspectives about EAP courses in Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and other countries than the United States (e.g., Crosthwaite, 2016; Deng, Cheng, Varaprasad, & Leng, 2010; Dooey, 2010; Ozarska, 2008) and few research studies have reached out to international students in U.S. universities to ask what they really need or what language issues they have. This comparative study was hence conducted to fulfill this research gap. It aimed to examine linguistic difficulties encountered by mainland Chinese international students, as the largest international student group, in U.S. universities, to find the influence of Chinese-English (first language-second language, L1-L2)

transfer over their using of academic and communicative English in the U.S. classrooms, and to investigate the overlapping in their English difficulties caused by Chinese-English (L1-L2) transfer and caused by the differences between English use for academic and for communicative purpose. It intended to investigate the possible reasons and provide solutions regarding curriculum and instruction to overcome or at least relieve these difficulties.

This research was based on two previous independent research studies: (a) Chinese English Learners' Perceptions of the Negative Transfer of Their First Language to the Second Language Acquisition—An Exploratory Study in U.S. (referred as the Ch-En transfer in the following paragraphs), and (b) Difficulties Encountered in Class by College-Level Chinese Students in Academic English: A Focus on Chinese Students Who Are Enrolled in A Cooperative Program (i.e., the in-class difficulties as below).

Literature Review

When studying in the U.S., many Chinese international students perceive the English language as a major barrier. In classrooms settings, most Chinese and other English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students reported having difficulties with academic listening (include both listening and giving response) and academic writing (Brown, 1998; Huang, 2004, 2005, & 2006). One possible explanation was that Chinese international students would encounter difficulties caused by the negative transfer between Chinese and English, the higher requirement of English proficiency inherited in academic English itself, and the difficulties by combining the two.

Negative Transfer Embodied in Five Linguistic Components

Negative transfer happens when Chinese English learners may not yet have managed English-specific knowledge and apply Chinese language knowledge to English learning, which may be viewed as strategic but inappropriate (Figueredo, 2006). Chinese English learners, as many EFL learners in other countries, are not educated in a bilingual environment when growing up. They acquire their L1 at home and learn L2 in schools normally starting at the age of 9 (NSTES, 2001) mainly from Chinese English teachers who share the same linguistic and cultural background with them. Due to the distinctive differences between the Chinese and English languages, Chinese EFL learners seem to have many negative transfers of their Chinese to English.

This may be partly explained by that Chinese and English are from two different language families. The two languages have tremendous linguistic and typological differences, so they have hardly any traits in common (Li, 2009). Chinese students' knowledge of their native language mandarin has very little reference value in their English language learning process (Li, 2009). In most cases, most Chinese learners find it very hard to learn English to a very high level (Li, 2009). In applied linguistics, there are five generally classified linguistic components in English: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Chinese students may have negative transfer in some or all of the five domains.

Phonology. Phonology is the study of the sound system in a language (Fromkin & Rodman, 1974). It includes vowels, consonants, stress, tone, and intonation. In phonology, the

interference of L1 over L2 is considered as common (Smoke, 1998), as some pronunciation errors are caused by the absence of a certain sound in learners' L1 (Fromkin & Rodman, 1974). This also applies to Chinese students, because certain phonetics do not exist in the Chinese language. For instance, Chinese learners tend to feel difficult in articulating words that contain one or more consonant clusters (e.g. strengths:[streK,s]), particularly because such pronunciation does not exist in the Mandarin (Li, 2009). Many Chinese have difficulties mastering the tone system in English, mainly because some phonetics are alien to Chinese speakers (Li, 2009).

Morphology. Morphology is "the internal structure of words, and of the rules by which words are formed" (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2011, p.81). EFL learners may encounter obstacles in the meaning of words, for instance, that of compound words; its semantic property changes when single morpheme combined into a larger unit (Fromkin & Rodman, 1974). In China, EFL learners manage word spellings and meanings, mainly through memorization and dictation (Hu, 2002), without commanding the internal rule of word structure.

Syntax. Syntax refers to the sentence structures (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2011), including grammatical rules and lexical principles (Fromkin & Rodman, 1974). Negative transfer for Chinese EFL learners would include ignoring verb due to the absence of verb tenses in Chinese. Another common negative influence from Chinese is that in Chinese, run-on sentences are grammatically right; thus Chinese English learners are tempted to sequence verbs together in English, without paying attention to inflectional (Li, 2009).

Semantics. Semantics is the study of "the linguistic meaning of morphemes, words, phrases, and sentence" (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2011, p.180). For language learners, English is regarded as complicated because the word has different lexical meanings based on the contexts in which it is applied, and different syntactic roles or forms are relative to its position in a sentence (Menyuk, 1971). Chinese EFL learners may not realize the factors of contexts and positions when deciphering the linguistic meaning of cluttered units.

Pragmatics. Pragmatics is concerned with **"**how a context affects meaning" (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2011, p.180). It deals with how to use English appropriately. Such appropriateness varies in different cultures. For instance, instead of saying "what?" (a normal response in the Chinese culture) when not hearing others clearly, Chines ESL or EFL learners need to learn to say "Pardon?" to show politeness and appropriateness. It can be inferred that literal translation of L1 to L2 might not be appropriate and such appropriateness is sometimes culture-bounded.

The Chinese Curriculum and Pedagogy in English Teaching

In China, education policy is formulated at the national level. English learners normally start compulsory English classes at the age of 9 (NSTES, 2001). Elementary pupils receive two or three 40-minute-long English classes per week; students in middle and high schools have five or six 45-minute-long English lessons every week (Nunan, 2003). The qualified English teachers refer to Chinese English teachers with formal English teaching education (Wang, Lin, & Spalding, 2008). Elementary English teachers typically receive credentials in English education from three-year normal schools and as do secondary teachers in four-year colleges or universities

(Wang et al., 2008). Although these rules are in place, such a compulsory introduction of English classes may not be feasible for all classrooms due to funding or regional differences.

From the pedagogical perspective, for decades, English teaching in China has promoted a strong linguistic focus on grammar, reading, and translations, with a method called "teacher-centered textbook-analysis-based grammar-translation" (Yang, 2000, p. 19). Such traditional teaching approaches are characterized by systematic study of grammar, extensive use of Chinese-English translation, and persistent memorization of syntactic patterns and vocabulary (Hu, 2002). At the beginning of the class, teacher would explain the to-be-learned grammar with exemplary sentences. Students then recite the grammar structure, and practice it by creating similar sentences through replacing words. The ultimate goal is to produce error free sentences (to be the closest to the exemplary sentences in the text), and give quick translations between Chinese and English. Such a method is considered to be superficial and as a result, learning content stayed at a "knowing" rather than "mastering" (Starr, 2012).

Chinese International Students' Language Difficulties in English Classrooms

Regardless of their TOFEL scores and their previous academic background, many Chinese international students reported having difficulties in U.S. university classrooms in the area of understanding lectures, giving responding, and writing academic essays (Brown, 1998; Huang, 2004, 2005, & 2006). Academic listening (involves both listening and speaking) could be considered as the root of all linguistic difficulties related to Listening and Speaking (e.g. comprehending lecture, giving response). Academic listening is grouped into transactional listening (Richards, 1983, 1994). It requires the speaker and listener to be mastery in language skills in order to deliver/receive accurate and coherent message (Brown & Yule, 1983). The high requirement in language proficiency hence cause difficulties for Chinese university students in comprehending the lecture content, especially when it is carried out in a rapid pace, or in the format of long and complex sentence (Huang, 2004). Also, considering Chinese students are so used to the "ideal" English (accent-free, noise-free), they need more time to decode the received information, when it is received in a real-life setting, with noise, accents, and personal speaking habits. Also, academic listening itself would require listeners to understand the content matters, including terminologies and academic words, which according to Tang's research, is absent in the Chinese curriculum in college English learning (Tang, 2014).

Chinese international students' difficulties with academic writing, on the other hand, are more related to the negative L1-L2 transfer. The structure of English composition is linear and direct, different from Chinese composition as roundabout (Kaplan, 2001, p. 17). Unlike English writers, who employ logical reasoning of deduction, Chinese writers often think in a circular way. Just as Carson (2001, p. 137) remarks, "what learners have learned about learning to read and write in their L1" might "affect how they approach literary acquisition in ESL writing classrooms". Chinese English learners write academic English as if they were writing in Chinese, while at the same time, English readers understand their writing from the perspective of English writing discourse characteristics (Liu & Deng, 2005). This causes misunderstandings when students deal with English academic writing (Hu, 2014).

The Current Study as a Comparative Case Study

The current study involves collecting and analyzing data from two cases: (a) the Ch-En transfer and (b) the in-class difficulties, conducted consecutively in Fall 2014 and Spring 2015, both of which explored participants' language challenges in both social and academic contexts and the possible reasons, from participating students' perspectives via interviews. As a comparative case study, the study "offers a cross-case analysis suggesting generalization" about in what aspects of English language Chinese international students have difficulties (Merriam, 1998, p. 40). Language barriers (Cummins, 1979) is a typical challenge that Chinese students, at large, have encountered and may continue to face, when studying in the U.S. Accordingly, their linguistic difficulties were the focus of our study.

In this comparative case study, we analyzed data in two stages: the "within-case analysis and the cross-case analysis" (Merriam, 1998, p. 194). In the first stage, each of the cases was ". . . first treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself" (Merriam, 1998, p. 194). After completing the first stage, we started cross-case analysis, aiming to establish "an abstraction across cases" (Merriam, 1998, p. 195). We tried to develop a general explanation that "fits each of the individual cases, even though the cases will vary in their details" (Yin, 1994, p.112).

Research Method

The primary goal of our paper was to explore language difficulties encountered by college-level Chinese students in U.S. universities from their perspectives. Accordingly, the research questions were:
1. What are the most encountered difficulties by Chinese students using English in communicative contexts?
2. What are the most encountered difficulties by Chinese students using English in academic contexts?
3. What are the least encountered difficulties by Chinese students using English in communicative contexts?
4. What are the least encountered difficulties by Chinese students using English in academic contexts?
5. Are these difficulties caused by a negative transfer of L1 to L2?
6. Are there any difficulties relevant to their previous English learning experiences in China?

This paper utilized a comparative study to answer the research questions above. Data, based on two previously unpublished explorative case studies: (a) the Ch-En transfer and (b) the in-class difficulties. We analyzed for insights for both, within each case and across cases. We made a matrix by setting five linguistic components as the rows and four language skills as columns and then filled each cell with participants' perception of their challenges and difficulties. With two different dimensions to look at these two "similar and contrasting cases" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 29), we found more precise (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and detailed data which sometimes overlap, so as to better illuminate and answer our research questions. After compiling the ten participants' data, we developed concepts and themes, and then provided findings as well as corresponding suggestions in the discussion section

Two Unpublished Explorative Case Studies

The first case study (i.e. the Ch-En transfer) recruited six Chinese students studying across the U.S.: Jia, Bing, Ding, Ivy, Jason, and House. It examined the six Chinese university students' perceptions of their negative transfer of their L1 to L2 when studying in the U.S., from the five linguistic aspects—phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics.

The second research study (i.e. the in-class difficulties) had four male Chinese students: A, B, C, and D, who were in the same cooperative program at the same university starting in the same year. The researchers adopted interpersonal interviews to collect data of approximately six-hour-long audios in total, to answer the research questions from the angle of four language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing.

These two studies were chosen, due to three reasons: firstly, they were conducted almost simultaneously; secondly, both had similar research purpose, that is, to explore English language difficulties encountered by Chinese international students in U.S. universities; thirdly, the majority of the participants in the two studies had experiences of EAP or similar preparatory language courses.

Participants

Though the two research studies interviewed different participants, there was homogeneity among them: (a) they were all Chinese college level students aged from 20 to 25; (b) they all learned English in China for the whole period of public education before going to U.S. for study; (c) they were enrolled in similar intensive English programs before they started their major-tracked fields; (d) they all had similar English proficiency (i.e., low or lower intermediate level); (e) the majority of them had preparatory language courses before or at the same time of their major course work; (f) they were selected for the studies through oral exchanges, as a purposive sampling.

There were also some differences among the two groups of participants: (a) the first case study recruited six Chinese students (i.e. four male and two female students), while the four participants in the second study were all male; (b) the participants in the first study were studying across the U.S., and those in the second study were studying at the same university; (c) the former participants were both undergraduate and graduate students, and the latter were graduate students only; (d) the former students were not in a cooperative program, but the latter were, as a cohort; (e) the former students were in the U.S. for over a year, but the latter ones were for one year or less.

Data Collection

After the approval of Institutional Review Board (IRB), all of the participants in the two studies signed consent forms before interviews started. Interviews were audio-recorded one to one at a time in a private room. These interpersonal interviews were half constructed, starting

with open-ended questions and follow-up questions were used when needed. A semi-structured, guided, responsive conversation format was followed (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007, p. 96), " skin color, race and cultural identity sometimes facilitates, sometimes complicates, and sometimes erects barriers in fieldwork" when "researchers are studying people within their same ethnic group." Such was the case in both studies. To minimize this shortcoming, interviewers used probes recommended by Bodgan and Biklen (2007) during the interviews, such as: "Take me through the experience." "Would you explain that?" "Could you please give me an example?" and so on.

All of the interviews were conducted in the Mandarin Chinese language in the first study and most of those in the second study were in English. Such a decision was made to participants' preference, which was highly valued by the researchers in the two studies. Moreover, the interviews in the first study were no more than 35 minutes each, and the interview for each participant in the second study was approximately 90 minutes long. It was because in the second study, the interview has two rounds: 60 minutes for the first round, and another 30 minutes as a following-up. Also, in the second study, as participants were using their second language (English) for the interview, they need more time to digest the received information as well as organize their thoughts into English sentences.

Data Analysis

Researchers analyzed two studies within each case first and then across cases by coding, developing themes, and creating categories based on the patterns and topics they uncovered regarding research questions individually.

In the within-case analysis, we followed "the step-by-step process" (Merriam, 1998, p.180). Researchers began to construct category when reading the first interview transcript by writing down notes in the margin of the transcript (Merriam, 1998). Then when moving to the next transcript, the researchers made notes the same as the first one and then compared the two sets of notes which were later merged into "one master list of concepts" (p.181) derived from two transcripts. With more sets of transcripts, the master list became longer and reflected "the recurring regularities or patterns" (p.181) which were then developed into categories or themes.

In the cross-case stage of data analysis, two groups of researchers shared their within-case analysis findings of their own studies and the other. By merging emergent concepts, the two sets of data from two individual studies were combined. The cross-case data analysis was conducted in an iterative and cyclic manner using coding and "conceptually clustered matrix" strategies (Miles & Huberman 1994, p. 128). The conceptually clustered matrix was used to generate cross-case comparison for the two cases. We designed the matrix by setting five linguistic components as the rows and four language skills as columns and then filled each cell with participants' perception of their challenges and difficulties.

Findings

Syntax as the Most Challenging

The Ch-En transfer study found that the majority of the participants felt most challenged

in syntax, due to the distinctive differences of the grammatical rules and sentence structures between the Chinese and the English language. For instance, Ivy mentioned the use and location of prepositions and verb tenses as her issues. She said that she often forgot to make verb tenses consistent when writing. Jason talked about inversion sentences and the inverted parts in question sentences, which he found to be difficult. Bing echoed Jason about inversion; he, moreover, added multi-layer attributive clauses as his challenges in academic writings. Ding, who considered grammar to be the biggest issue for him, had his hard time in writing complex sentences, which might also deal with clauses. He chose to use object clauses, rather than attributive or adverbial clauses. Ding also talked about the tense issue, as it required both a selection among the multiple tenses, and changes in spellings. House discussed all of the above in his interview-- propositions, tenses, inversion sentences, and clauses. Jia could not differentiate various clauses, thus was reluctant to use them.

The problem of multi-layer attributive clauses was also noted by the four participants from the in-class difficulty group. "It was more obvious during presentations. Chinese students hardly use it, but some native speakers and teachers use lots of attributive clauses", participant C reported. Participant B also had difficulties in anatomizing components in English sentences:

I think language structure in English is very complicated. I cannot tell which part is subject and which part is object. It is obvious to me in Chinese though. In English, especially when I read academic articles, I always need lots of time to figure out what the author is trying to say.

What Ivy, House and Ding mentioned regarding verbs tense issues was true of the four participants in the second explorative study. They all confessed that they always used the original form of verbs when they used them.

In oral communications, sometimes the participants in the in-class difficulty group realized that they had made mistakes but they did not have enough time to rearrange the sentences, as oral communication requires instant feedback. Participant D, for instance, gave examples and shared his concern as below:

Tense and singular form. When I speak English, I will use 'He go to…' or "I do homework yesterday." I will use a lot of dos. If I want to use all the verbs correctly, I will speak very, very slowly. So I think tense is my big problem.

As evident from above, lack of verb tenses, verb conjugations, inversions and clauses in the Chinese language (L1) has the strongest negative impact on the participants' ability to structure English sentences, reflected in both academic writing and speaking.

Morphology as the Least Challenging except Terminologies

Most of the participants in the first study did not perceive morphology as challenging. Bing explained that he may have felt challenged in the beginning of English learning, "not now", thanks to the aid of using roots and affixes. Ivy, as the only participant who felt morphology as challenging, stated that, "I am lazy to remember word spellings because I can use proofreading

in my computer when I write". Before Ivy used a computer to write, she easily forgot the spellings of those "long words" if she did not use them frequently. Ivy also felt confused by words with similar spellings, such as *effective* and *affective*. Ivy, however, did not think English word spellings had something to do with Chinese; she attributed work ethic to how many and how well she could remember English word spellings. House shared the same opinion on vocabulary level by commenting, "Cognitive ability and levels of work ethic decide how many English words you remember".

The four participants from the in-class difficulty research expressed their encountered challenges in managing terminologies, which is under a subcategory of morphology. Participant A stated, "It was not difficult for words you use daily, you can use roots and affixes; but for terminologies, it is very difficult. I cannot think about any relevant words, and some words were borrowed from Latin! " Similarly, D said "I spent lots of time memorizing the Chinese names for these terminologies, principles, and theories in Chinese. And now, I need to memorize them all over again! In English!" Participant B and C seemed to have fewer difficulties in morphology. B was working in the lab, thus he needed to use those terminologies frequently when communicating with colleagues and supervisor, and he thought such frequent use of the terminologies helped him to memorize them. Participant C was a full-time student without any lab assistant position, however, he said "it is difficult, but as long as you spend more time on memorizing, it is OK", which is an alternative saying of Ivy and House's opinions-- "cognitive ability and level of work ethic."

Thus there is no positive or negative transfer of the Chinese language (L1) to the English language (L2), thus learners relied on themselves instead of their prior knowledge in L1 to manage word spellings.

Phonology, Semantics and Pragmatics also as Challenging

Phonology. Every participating student in the Ch-En Transfer study felt challenged in phonology, in particular, in vowels, tones and intonations, and stress. The participants were all aware of their non-native-English accent and some of them (e.g. Ivy, Jason and Jia) chose to speak English in a low voice in public to avoid being heard with non-standard or accented pronunciations, which was also mentioned by the participants as reaction rooting in low self-confidence. House and Jason both mentioned that their "flat and not fluctuating" oral English mirrored their Chinese English teachers' pronunciation problems. Jason mentioned his first English teacher who did not teach him Standard English pronunciation. Most of the participants said that they could not pronounce vowels correctly (e.g. Jason's *smile* and *smell*), because they could not differentiate them as those sounds don't exist in Chinese. Jason, Bing, House and Jia also mentioned tones and intonations. House described his accented English as "flat and not fluctuating" under the influence of oral Chinese, and Jia depicted the Standard English as having "exaggerated rising and falling tones".

Also related to phonology, non-native-like accent was the common concern in participants of both studies. For instance, participant A in the second study said that "what I am concerned is that sometimes they cannot understand me, because sometimes I have accent in pronouncing some words. (…) so I feel embarrassed. Then I will feel nervous." Similarly, Bing

in the first study mentioned her "Chinese accent when speaking English". To reduce her Chinese accent, she would mimic native English speakers around her.

Semantics. Participants in both studies gave little examples regarding their challenges in Semantics. However, Ivy said she had some issues in conveying correct meanings in her academic writing. House also mentioned that sometimes he could not correctly convey what he wanted to say in oral and written English, mainly because of grammar errors.

Pragmatics. Ivy, as the only participant in the first study, chose pragmatics as her most challenging linguistic component. She stated twice that ,"The whole sentence will lose its point if you use one wrong word". She even remarked that, "If you cannot use English words accurately and properly, you lose the point of learning the language." She experienced difficulty in terms of word choice by giving an example of choosing *pretty* or *beautiful*.

Other students also mentioned pragmatics issues in their writings. Jason talked about English conventions as part of pragmatics—being concise and coherent. Jason said that he quitted drafting in Chinese and then translating in English for his academic writing because those translated sentences might be grammatically correct, but do not follow the writing conventions of English. Bing also talked about English writing conventions by saying that he needed to be aware of avoiding repetition and using more connection words such as *but, however, whereas,* and *although* to align his English writing with the conventions. Ding talked about English writing conventions by certain avoidance of Chinese writing styles, including rhetoric or parallel constructions, and using proverbs as quotes.

Listening and Reading

The five components mentioned above were used to analyze participants' challenges when they needed to start or respond in words or text with an active role; however, to be able to accomplish such a role, they also needed to understand and decode the given information from listening and reading, which was included in the in-class difficulties study.

Listening: New word meanings, terminologies, and jargon. In class, professors used many field terminologies in English, which the participants only knew the counterparts in Chinese. As a result, those content-based terminologies were new to them and caused their confusions. Furthermore, one word may have multiple meanings, and the participants may have not known some of the meanings, which were used in class. Those confused students reacted by stopping to look up meanings in dictionaries and then missed more incoming sentences. With moments as such of missing information, the participating students could not understand lectures completely.

Listening: Speed and accent. Speed and accent were another significant factor in listening. The participants in the second study admitted that they needed a longer time than native English speakers in understanding, when information was received in an audio format. One of them said that he needed to hear the full sentence and then was able to start the decoding process, whereas native speakers could start decoding together with receiving information. When professors in class also had a foreign accent other than Chinese, the participants who did not have rich living-abroad experiences had more challenges in decoding. For instance,

participant A perceived one of his course as "my most difficult course", not only because of its content, but "the professor's strong accent", by saying "I try to follow, but after 10 or 15 minutes, I will get lost". Participant B complained his professor's accent in another class, by stating "the professor is from Russia, and has a very strong accent; there were a lot of new words in that class. I think I only understood 30% of the lectures in class."What also mattered were classmates' accents. Two participants talked about their difficulties in understanding their peers' words because of their foreign accent (i.e., Egyptian and Indian in the case), when they were arranged together for group projects or observed presentations.

Moreover, speed and accent might create a synergy, which makes those sentences even more difficult to understand. Some professors naturally spoke faster than others, and so did some classmates. Participant C revealed that, "The professor speaks very fast that I cannot understand him." Similarly, Participant B complained that, "It is very difficult for me to take notes when the professor speaks fast, especially those with accent". D exemplified the statement by saying "I sometimes wrote down a wrong word because the professor joint two words together, it should be *active reader*, but I thought it to be *accident*". In addition, participant A gave comments on both his professor and his classmate-- "When got excited, he (the professor) spoke even faster! …When we Chinese speak English, we speak word by word, but Indians can keep on talking and they do not need to breathe".

Inferred from above, these participating Chinese students had low sensitivity to English accents, mainly because they were rarely exposed to other accented English than British or American English, when studying English in China.

Listening: Cultural barriers. Two participants in the second study mentioned that some language difficulties came from cultural differences. Because they were not born and raised up in the U.S., they encountered greater difficulties in understanding culture-bounded words or texts. Participant C asserted, "I always find it hard to understand the examples given by the professor especially when the examples are related to culture." He also pointed out that when his peers in class made jokes, he was always at a loss because humor and jokes are heavily loaded with cultures.

Reading. The participants mentioned that when they read long and complex sentences with many clauses, they felt it too overwhelming. For them, it was not easy to tell the grammatical parts of a long sentence apart. Some unknown words were also a hindrance for their comprehension. They had to look them up in a dictionary, which also slowed down their reading speed.

Discussion

Syntax Taught most but still as the Most Challenging

Traditional teaching approaches in China are characterized by systematic study of grammar, extensive use of Chinese-English translation, and persistent memorization of syntactic patterns and vocabulary (Hu, 2002). Nevertheless, participating students from the Ch-En transfer study who had their English education in China in the period of 2000-2010 still marked syntax as the most challenging linguistic aspect of their academic pursuits in the United States.

In addition, participants from the in-class difficulty study who also learned English in the same period considered syntax as a big challenge as well. A tentative explanation about the slight difference between the two groups' perceptions was that syntax difficulties usually happen in the area of writing and reading and the second study focused on in-class difficulties which excluded after-class assignments that involved a lot of reading and writing. Moreover, with the same set of questions asked in the Ch-En transfer research study, similar answers might also be found in participants from the in-class difficulty research study.

This brought up a series of questions for further research:
(1) Is the predominately traditional teaching method effective or not for English learners in China?
(2) If so, why do English learners from China have the biggest challenges in the syntactic usage given it was the most taught area?
(3) If not, what needs to be addressed and reformed for English teaching in China, in terms of curriculum and instruction?

Which Matters More? -- Negative or No Transfer of Mandarin (Chinese) to English

In second language acquisition, L1 transfer can be described as the effect of first-language knowledge over L2 development (Figueredo, 2006; Genesee, et al., 2004; Major, 2001). In this paper, we found the negative transfer of L1 (Chinese) to L2 (English) in the fields of phonology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics in both studies. Nonetheless, we did not find any transfer of Chinese to English in morphology.

From the participants' viewpoints, no transfer had no interferences on their English learning, and negative transfers of their L1 to L2 could easily lead to challenges, detailed as: (a) delays or pauses in reaction, because the language transfer took time, (b) grammar issues, because these participating students constructed incorrect English sentences, and (c) inappropriate expressions, because the participants were seeking an English word which has the closest meaning to his/her Chinese word, without further considering the context.

Thus, English educators in China and the United States should pay more attention to those specific areas (i.e., phonology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics) of negative transfer. Though with difference in degree, all participants reported a transfer between Chinese and English.

The Influence of English Teaching Method in China

Habitual behavior of translation. All the Chinese participants of the two studies started to receive English education in China from Chinese English teachers, around the age of ten after they had known and established their L1 (McLaughlin, 1978). Such a sequential bilingual acquisition might be impacted by the two factors: L1 itself and the English teaching method.

All of the participants had over 10 years English learning experiences in China. English teaching in China promoted a method called "teacher-centered textbook-analysis-based grammar-translation" (Yang, 2000, p. 19). Such a method brought a magnificent influence on

participants of the two studies, many of them reported to "think in Chinese first, and then translate ideas into English words". It should be noted that such Chinese-English translation was more frequently used when the participants dealt with academic contents in academic settings. For instance, participant House said that, "If the conversation is associated with professional content, or in formal occasions and I need to pay attention to my speaking, I would think in Chinese first, and then translate into English". In spite of the fact that the frequency of such translation decreased with an increasing in exposure to English, such kind of habit did not disappear. For instance, participant Ivy had been immersed in English for four years, with the longest time among all participants (i.e., two years in Canada and two years in the U.S.), but still she reported occasional translation.

Furthermore, the participants in both research projects admitted that they would also translate English to Chinese, especially with information in academic English. Participant Ding from the Ch-En transfer research said that she used *Google translate* when reading English textbooks, and explained the reason as "(I am) lazy, and bothered to read".

Seen from above, eagerness to translate to enter the participants' comfort zone was found to be predominant among the participants from the two studies. Such a compulsive habitual behavior might be closely related with the traditional translation method they had in China.

Passive learners. Traditional English education in China is predominantly teacher-centered (Hu, 2002; Yang, 2000), thus English learners are more likely to be passive recipients. The participants who had had such a teaching approach for years were still passive in the U.S. from two aspects: first, when they had to speak English in class in U.S., they chose to use a low voice to avoid being heard with accented pronunciations, whereas students from other countries with their own accent could keep talking in class or in groups; second, they had more difficulties in writing and speaking, than listening and reading which only require passive reception, to express their ideas, because active productions as such had been largely neglected in their teacher-centered classrooms from their English learning experiences in China.

Differences in Challenges in Communicative/ Academic English and in Oral/Written English

The participating English learners had different and various level of challenges in communicative and academic English, as well as oral and written English. When they were asked about their challenges, what the participants from two studies stated most often was academic written English. Their main challenges lay in syntax, semantics and pragmatics. They knew the difference between English grammatical rules and sentence structure and those of their L1. Nevertheless, they failed to monitor themselves in producing correct and native-like sentences with atomicity for academic essays. They all believed that with more practice, their academic writing skills would improve.

The participants in both groups had similar challenges in academic oral English as the academic written English. For academic purposes, participants from the two studies tended to think in Chinese then translate words and concepts into English. Such instant translations, however, would incur issues in syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Though their professors

recommended them to think and express in English, they were not capable of doing so yet. Along with retrieving and translating the content knowledge, these Chinese students also needed to pay attention to their phonological issues. The participants did not realize how such multi-tasking workload led to their lack of confidence and reluctance to become active participants in classrooms. Moreover, the participants were more likely to have longer response time than others, because of more needed time in decoding, organizing reply sentences and uttering correct pronunciations.

What the participants in both studies perceived least challenging was communicative written English. This, however, does not mean that they had fewest challenges in the field. Nevertheless, it might be inferred that they had fewest chances to use their communicative written English. That is to say, they might have challenges in coding and decoding abbreviations, idioms, and slangs if they needed to communicate with native English speakers via Facebook or other mass media, or text messages.

Conclusion

This study has compared two exploratory studies, both of which from the participants' perspectives identified encountered language difficulties in different contexts. Accordingly, English educators in the U.S. and China should pay greater attention to those areas in their curriculum design and instruction in preparatory language courses to target students and make corresponding changes, to prepare Chinese international students for their academic pursuit in different domains.

Moreover, English educators in China and the United States should realize the differences of students' challenges in communicative or academic English, in oral or written English, in speaking, listening, reading or writing, and address such differences separately. English educators and practitioners with target students of other languages might also consider the level of differences and similarity between L1 and L2, negative or no transfer of L1 to L2, the differences of students' challenges in communicative/academic English and in oral/written English in the process of curriculum design and instruction implementation which deals with how to deliver content knowledge with suitable and effective accommodations to international students.

Future Research

A larger study of Chinese students with different levels of English proficiency as participants would be stronger. Further study focusing on Chinese students with different time lengths in the U.S. is also recommended. Another interesting aspect of English language learning which was not explored in this study is the potential influence of *Pinyin* (a Latin-based phonological writing system; Castro, 2014, p.9) on English phonology. It would also be interesting to combine the focuses and perspectives from the two studies together as a multi-layer lens, which include communicative and academic English, in-class and after-class contexts, four language skills and five linguistic components, to examine Chinese English learners' language challenges in U.S. universities or the language barriers of other EFL/ESL university students whose L1 is not Mandarin.

Practical Implications

Practical implications and suggestions resulting from the findings of the two exploratory case studies are: (1) use of graphic organizer to help students diagnose the syntactic similarities and differences between the two languages; (2) use of written texts with syntax errors to develop students' language awareness; (3) comparison of the draft sentences and the polished sentences to build up metacognition of syntax knowledge; (4) full and deep cultural-linguistic immersion or pairing with native English speakers to improve English learners' phonological and pragmatic skills; (5) addition of specialty-related vocabulary to EAP programs for students at a low or intermediate level of English proficiency before entering the mainstream classes; (6) gradual exclusion of using dictionaries in class and consistent inclusion of charts and other visual aids for international students; (7) awards, extra credits or other incentives to promoting active in-class participation and more chances given to quiet students for equity. Such pedagogical strategies would enhance the possibility of strengthening international students' command of the English language and their newly-learned academic knowledge, as well as their competence to fit in the mainstream classes.

Scholastic Implications

As a bottom-up voice, the study will contribute to the existing research studies of Chinese international students in the U.S. in general. In a wider sense, it may also be helpful to other linguistic contexts where students' L1 is not the language they use for study in their universities.

Accordingly, this paper is intended for English educators in China and those in the United States or other English-speaking countries who teach international students in EAP programs and beyond. It may be also beneficial to scholars in applied linguistics, and cross-cultural, intercultural or global studies.

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