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More than Language: The Learning Experience of Chinese International English Language Learners (ELLs) at a Canadian University

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More than Language: The Learning Experience of Chinese International English Language Learners (ELLs) at a Canadian University

Abstract

This study examines the learning experience of Chinese international undergraduate students taking a large core first-year anthropological science course (ANT101) by distance learning during the Winter of 2021 at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM). We review the general learning experiences of Chinese international students (n=30) compared to domestic students and other international students through analysis of qualitative and quantitative data collected from self-report pre- and post-course surveys distributed in the course. Our study challenges some prevailing notions about Chinese international student experiences of studying in Western universities. Our data suggests that while many Chinese international students may feel a lack of English language proficiency is a barrier to their learning, it does not significantly impact their performance when compared with domestic students. The results presented here suggest that educational research and policy makers should move beyond an emphasis on language proficiency and further examine the role of other factors when developing strategies to facilitate supportive learning environments for English Language learners (ELL) and international students in a university setting.

Cette étude examine l'expérience d'apprentissage d'étudiants internationaux chinois de premier cycle qui suivent un cours important de sciences anthropologiques. Ce cours de première année (ANT101) a été offert par apprentissage à distance pendant l'hiver 2021 à l'Université de Toronto Mississauga (UTM). Nous passons en revue les expériences d'apprentissage générales des étudiants internationaux chinois (n = 30) par rapport aux étudiants domestiques et aux autres étudiants internationaux en analysant les données qualitatives et quantitatives recueillies à partir d'enquêtes d'auto-évaluation avant et après le cours distribuées dans le processus du cours. Notre étude remet en question les notions dominantes sur les expériences des étudiants internationaux chinois dans les universités occidentales. Nos données suggèrent que si de nombreux étudiants internationaux chinois peuvent penser qu'un manque de maîtrise de l'anglais est un obstacle à leur apprentissage, cela n'a pas d'impact significatif sur leurs performances par rapport aux étudiants domestiques. Les résultats préliminaires présentés ici suggèrent que la recherche en éducation et les décideurs politiques devraient se concentrer au-delà de la maîtrise de la langue et examiner le rôle d'autres facteurs lors de l'élaboration de stratégies visant à faciliter des environnements d'apprentissage

favorables pour les apprenants de la langue anglaise (ELL) et les étudiants internationaux dans un milieu universitaire.

Keywords: English Language Learners (ELLs), international students, post-secondary learning experiences

Background

The number of international students in Canadian universities and colleges has been increasing in recent years. From 2008/2009 to 2018/2019, international students in Canadian universities and colleges boomed from about 100,000 to over 300,000 and constituted over half of the growth in all postsecondary student enrollments, culminating in more than 721,000 international students studying in Canada in the year 2018 (Government of Canada, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2020). The numbers of international students enrolled in universities staggered during the 2020-2021 academic year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but made an impressive return in 2021-2022, reaching a record 807,750 individuals with valid study permits in Canada (Moosapeta, 2023; Munroe, 2021). At the University of Toronto, international students made up over a quarter of the undergraduate population and a fifth of the graduate population in 2020-21 (University of Toronto, 2021). By 2025-2026, it is expected that the international student population will increase to just under a third at the undergraduate level and reach near a quarter at the graduate level (University of Toronto, 2021).

Students from China represent a significant percentage of international students studying in Canada (16.5% from 2015-2019) (Crossman et al., 2021). At the University of Toronto, students from mainland China (People's Republic of China) comprised the largest group of the international student population at almost two-thirds (13,307 students, 64.9%), while the number of students from Hong Kong and Taiwan (Republic of China) were fifth (369 students, 1.8%) and sixth (318 students, 1.6%) respectively (University of Toronto, 2021).

Challenges Faced by International Students

Studies often highlight the lack of sufficient English language skills as the main obstacle for international student success in university classrooms (CBC News, 2013; Dehaas, 2013; Drew & Mudzingwa, 2018; Hu & Gao, 2021; Trenkic, 2018). Specifically, writing academic English has become a focus of ELL student support services across post-secondary institutions worldwide (Andrade, 2006; Brown, 2008; Moore et al., 2016; Wang & Machado, 2015). University-sponsored ELL support services typically involve a generalized study and writing skills program made up of one-on-one mentoring, or a curriculum credit or non-credit language course (Benzie, 2010; Moore et al., 2016), often called Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). A key challenge with WAC programs is traditionally low student attendance and the ELL student perception that these supports do not substantially benefit their academic and personal learning (Cheng & Fox, 2008; Moore et al., 2016).

Many researchers have noted that the education-language barrier goes beyond writing and speaking skills, and manifests in psychological strain on English Language Learning (ELL) students inside and outside of the classroom (e.g., Jao, 2013; Wang,

2009; Xiao, in press). For example, Chinese ELL students who feel they cannot fluently or accurately communicate in English have reported that they often avoid interacting with English first language speakers due to fear of being ridiculed or feeling out of place (Jiang & Altinyelken, 2022; Mukminin & McMahon, 2013; Rublik, 2018; Xiao, in press). Expectations in the Canadian classroom also extend beyond language requirements. Chinese ELL students may experience cultural dissonance from traditional passive learning, as expectations in the Canadian classroom are often based on active learning pedagogy emphasizing reflection, student engagement, independent learning with an emphasis on student agency, critical thinking, and thorough discussion (Alzahrani, 2018; Ge et al., 2019; Xiao, in press). This educational culture shock undermines ELL students' confidence (Ge et al., 2019; Huang & Brown, 2009; Wang & Machado, 2015; Xiao, in press). Students' relationships with teachers, and their roles as learners often differ from what they are used to in their domestic educational programs (Ge et al., 2019; Xiao, in press). These experiences of culture shock may lead to heightened anxiety, self-doubt, and a significant drop in confidence, hindering participation in their host communities.

Language and cultural barriers are equally challenging for Canadian educators in university classrooms with a diverse student population. Many studies have suggested that underlying cultural beliefs and practices (e.g., Confucianism) are entrenched in Chinese international students which may discourage them from self-promoting and challenging authority (Huang & Brown, 2009). Consequently, Chinese international students may tend to not participate in classroom debates as this behaviour may be considered inappropriate in their home culture. Such behaviour contradicts the motivational features of student engagement associated with modern western individualism that Canadian universities seek to cultivate in students (Ge et al., 2019; Xiao, in press).

ELL students may appear hesitant and slow as they navigate the dual challenges of acquiring English proficiency and comprehending subject matter content. This dual challenge significantly increases the workload and time it takes for ELL students to understand what they are studying (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Vaughn et al., 2016; Wang & Machado, 2015). For example, test taking can often take more time for ELL students, as they need to translate questions in addition to answering them. In fear of being disruptive, Chinese ELL students might hold off on asking their instructors for help with questions they have. Studies have suggested that instructors and peers sometimes interpret the 'passiveness' of Chinese international students as signs of disinterest in engaging with others and learning (Jiang & Altinyelken, 2022; Yochim & Servage, 2017). This is despite findings in surveys conducted on the experience of Chinese international students studying abroad that overwhelmingly support the notion that most of these students want to improve their English, make new friends, and gain international experiences (Jiang & Altinyelken, 2022; Xiao, in press). As well, explaining the perceived reluctance of Chinese international students to participate in

experiential and active learning activities as a result of cultural behaviors from Confucian ways of learning has been criticized as adherence to stereotypes of Asian learners (Xiao, in press). Racial and ethnic stereotyping trivializes cultural differences of learning and contributes to further marginalization of ELL students (Cui, 2015; Xiao, in press).

The focus on language proficiency in English Language Learner (ELL) students in Western countries often lacks empirical evidence specific to Chinese students (Fan, 2019). An examination of Chinese student experiences in Western education is important because of changing socio-economic and cultural contexts currently taking place in China (Fan, 2019). Fan (2019) states that “fresh insight into the paradox of Chinese learners is highly needed [as] many Chinese students are changing and developing their attitudes to learning in response to socio-economic changes [in China]” (p. 141).

Chinese ELL Students in ANT101

Introduction to Biological Anthropology and Archaeology (ANT101) is a first-year science course at UTM. Assessments consist of two multiple-choice term tests, weekly practical lab assignments, and an online problem-based learning assignment called The Virtual Mystery Project, in which students work in small groups to explore an open-ended case scenario through a series of scaffolding questions related to course materials (Fukuzawa et al., 2021). Due to the practical nature of the course material, the course has less of an emphasis on writing compared to other courses offered at the university. The course has thus attracted many students who are not confident with their writing abilities, including many ELL students. According to self-report surveys, of the 587 students who attended the Winter 2021 iteration of the course and consented to their information being used for research, 183 (31%) students responded to being English Language Learners and 84 (14%) students responded to being international students.

In previous iterations of the course, many Chinese ELL students had been identified to struggle in communicating their ideas in English through spoken and written forms (Fukuzawa & Chuenwattana, 2020). Teaching assistants (TAs) noted that these students tended to speak Mandarin Chinese in practical sessions and avoided engaging with English-speaking peers. Furthermore, some ELL students acknowledged that private online and in-person tutors helped them translate course materials into Mandarin or Cantonese. In response, a series of workshops were developed for ANT101 to help ELL students from China overcome language barriers during the Winter 2019 iteration (Fukuzawa & Chuenwattana, 2020). The workshops were developed and facilitated by a PhD student from Thailand who conducted her doctoral research in China and studied Mandarin Chinese at Fudan University in Shanghai (Chuenwattana, 2019). Drawing from her experience in the East Asian education system, Chuenwattana

(2019) based her workshop exercises on the pedagogy used in national exams in East Asia. These workshops consisted of four sessions throughout the term with spoken and written practice of the English language specifically related to course materials. Students earned a participation grade of 1% for each workshop they attended (for a possible total of 4%), and they were provided feedback on their final course assignment (worth 10% of the final grade). Overall, 17 Chinese ELL students attended the workshops, and their feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The final grades of ELL students who attended all four workshops were reported to be 12-13% higher than those of ELL students who participated in two or fewer workshop sessions.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the workshops for the Winter 2021 session were moved onto the online communication platform Zoom. There was a slight enrollment decline: whereas 17 of the 800 students (2%) attended the in-person workshops in 2019, only 8 of the 587 students (1.4%) attended the online workshops. There were also changes to the workshop structure. The new supervising TA (the first author) is a first-language Cantonese speaker who grew up in Canada but also fluently speaks Mandarin Chinese, having worked in rural China for several years prior to taking up the TA appointment. The more recent 2021 workshops constituted two assignment help sessions (workshops #1 and #3) and two test review sessions (workshops #2 and #4). The new workshops were modified to be more like tutoring lessons, providing review of the course content. Students would not get any extra grade for participating in the workshops but would receive help with understanding their lab assignments and developing learning strategies in studying for their term exams. Although the ELL workshops targeted Chinese ELL students, any students taking ANT101 were welcome to participate. Due to the diversity of the students who attended the workshops (see Table 4), the workshops were facilitated in English. However, when requested and appropriate, the supervising TA occasionally provided clarifications in Chinese.

Research Methods

Our case study utilizes data collected through online pre- and post-course surveys distributed to students during the Winter 2021 iteration of ANT101 at the University of Toronto Mississauga. Research ethics approval was obtained from the Tri-Council Research Ethics Committee of the University of Toronto (REB Protocol # 00037778, May 2019 – 2023). Our examination of the international student experience is part of a larger study examining educational outcomes from the Virtual Mystery Project (Fukuzawa et al., 2021) and the learning experience of the undergraduate students taking the course remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic (Vandergugten et al., 2021).

The surveys included a series of questions on student demographics, academic background, preferences and concerns for learning modalities, and previous exposure to anthropology. Students were asked whether they identified themselves as

international and ELL students and, if so, their geographic origin as well. There were also a series of questions for international students regarding their self-perceived proficiency in English and its effect on their communication in the classroom (Table 4). These questions were Likert-scaled from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Student identities were anonymized, and their survey responses were paired with their course grades for analysis. A survey with open-ended questions was also distributed to students who attended the final ELL workshop to ask for their feedback.

Results

In total, 587 students in the course took part in the online pre-and post-course surveys and also consented to include their answers in this study. Of the students that participated in the surveys, 523 identified as domestic students while 64 identified as international students. Thirty (or approximately half) of the 64 international students who took the course listed their region of origin as a place where a Chinese language is the official language and the most widely spoken language. Twenty-six students indicated geographic origin of mainland China (People's Republic of China), three students indicated an origin of Hong Kong, and one student indicated an origin of Taiwan (Republic of China).

Student Grades

Based on paired t-tests, there were no statistically significant differences in the final grades achieved by domestic students, international students, and Chinese international students enrolled in ANT101 during the Winter 2020 iteration (see Table 1). Although international students appeared to have performed slightly better than the domestic students (77.80 vs. 76.44 grade points), the difference in the final grades (arithmetic mean) between international students versus domestic students was not statistically significant (p value = 0.53). When the international student population is subcategorized into Chinese and non-Chinese international students, a similar result is seen. While the grade average of the non-Chinese international students is higher than that of domestic students (83.70 vs. 76.44 grade points), the difference is not statistically significant (p value = 0.38). Likewise, while the grades of the Chinese international students were lower than that of the domestic students (71.1 vs. 76.44 grade points), the difference was not statistically significant (p value = 0.66). The biggest difference came when we compared the grades of Chinese international students with non-Chinese international students (71.1 vs. 83.70 grade points), however this difference is not statistically significant (p value = 0.09).

Table 1

Average Student Final Grades in the ANT101 Winter 2021 Session, Using the Median and Arithmetic Mean

| | Students who consented to study (n=587) | Domestic students (n=523) | International students (n=64) | Non-Chinese international students (n=34) | Chinese international students (n=30) |
|--|---|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Final grades using the arithmetic mean | 76.59 | 76.44 | 77.80 | 83.70 | 71.1 |
| Final grades using the median | 81 | 81 | 80 | 85.5 | 71.5 |

Student Survey Responses

Of the 64 international students who participated in the study, 44 students completed the English language learners (ELL) section in the post-course survey questions to assess the effects of self-perceived proficiency in English on their learning experience in ANT101. This included 23 non-Chinese international students and 21 Chinese international students. Based on their self-reported responses, non-Chinese international students seemed to be slightly more confident in their English language fluency than Chinese international students (see Table 2). Yet, the responses also showed that both non-Chinese and Chinese international students demonstrated a range of confidence levels in their English language fluency. While most of the international students reported that they were confident with their language ability and felt that it did not impact their performance in the course, a minority from both groups did feel that their English language proficiency was a barrier to their learning (Table 2 Q1–Q4). Based on the survey responses, it appears that non-Chinese international students showed higher confidence in their English language fluency than their Chinese counterparts.

Furthermore, most international students self-reported that they regularly attended their practical sessions (Table 2 Q5). On average, Chinese international students attended the practical sessions more than their non-Chinese counterparts. Most of the international students answered that they felt comfortable when interacting with their Teaching Assistants (TAs) and peers, whether they were from a different culture or not (Table 2 Q7–Q8). Just as more Chinese international students had less confidence on average with their English language ability, they also felt less comfortable in their TA and peer interactions than their non-Chinese counterparts. However, while some students were not confident with their language abilities, their

responses suggested that it did not seriously affect their ability to comfortably interact with their TAs and fellow students.

Table 2

Self-Report Survey Responses of ELL Students in the ANT101 Winter 2021 Session

| Q1. I am fluent in the English language. | | |
|---|---|---------------------------------------|
| Response Options | Non-Chinese International Students (n=23) | Chinese International Students (n=21) |
| Strongly Agree | 48% (11) | 14% (3) |
| Agree | 22% (5) | 29% (6) |
| Neutral | 13% (3) | 33% (7) |
| Disagree | 13% (3) | 24% (5) |
| Strongly Disagree | 4% (1) | 0 |
| Q2. My English language ability makes it difficult to understand information presented in course video recordings. | | |
| Response Options | Non-Chinese International Students (n=23) | Chinese International Students (n=21) |
| Strongly Disagree | 39% (9) | 10% (2) |
| Disagree | 35% (8) | 19% (4) |
| Neutral | 13% (3) | 38% (8) |
| Agree | 13% (3) | 14% (3) |
| Strongly Agree | 0 | 19% (4) |
| Q3. My English language ability makes it difficult to understand the expectations of course assignments and tests. | | |
| Response Options | Non-Chinese International Students (n=23) | Chinese International Students (n=21) |
| Strongly Disagree | 35% (8) | 14% (3) |
| Disagree | 39% (9) | 24% (5) |
| Neutral | 22% (5) | 33% (7) |
| Agree | 4% (1) | 14% (3) |
| Strongly Agree | 0 | 14% (3) |
| Q4. My English language ability makes it difficult for me to work effectively in practical groups. | | |
| Response Options | Non-Chinese International Students (n=23) | Chinese International Students (n=21) |
| Strongly Disagree | 22% (5) | 14% (3) |
| Disagree | 39% (9) | 29% (6) |
| Neutral | 17% (4) | 29% (6) |
| Agree | 22% (5) | 14% (3) |

| | | |
|----------------|---|---------|
| Strongly Agree | 0 | 14% (3) |
|----------------|---|---------|

Q5. How often do you attend practical sessions?

| Response Options | Non-Chinese International Students (n=23) | Chinese International Students (n=21) |
|------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Very often | 39% (9) | 52% (11) |
| Often | 22% (5) | 10% (2) |
| Somewhat often | 13% (3) | 19% (4) |
| Not often | 17% (4) | 19% (4) |
| Not at all | 9% (2) | 0 |

Q6. I feel comfortable interacting with my TA in practical sessions.

| Response Options | Non-Chinese International Students (n=23) | Chinese International Students (n=21) |
|-------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Strongly Agree | 30% (7) | 24% (5) |
| Agree | 35% (8) | 43% (9) |
| Neutral | 22% (5) | 24% (5) |
| Disagree | 9% (2) | 5% (1) |
| Strongly Disagree | 4% (1) | 5% (1) |

Q7. I am comfortable interacting with other students in practical sessions.

| Response Options | Non-Chinese International Students (n=23) | Chinese International Students (n=21) |
|-------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Strongly Agree | 26% (6) | 19% (4) |
| Agree | 39% (9) | 43% (9) |
| Neutral | 17% (4) | 29% (6) |
| Disagree | 9% (2) | 5% (1) |
| Strongly Disagree | 9% (2) | 5% (1) |

Q8. I am comfortable interacting with students in practical sessions who are from a different cultural background than my own.

| Response Options | Non-Chinese International Students (n=23) | Chinese International Students (n=21) |
|-------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Strongly Agree | 26% (6) | 33% (7) |
| Agree | 48% (11) | 43% (9) |
| Neutral | 17% (4) | 14% (3) |
| Disagree | 0 | 5% (1) |
| Strongly Disagree | 9% (2) | 5% (1) |

The Learning Experience of Students who Attended the ELL Workshops

International students do not necessarily have lower proficiency in the English language than domestic students, and some domestic students may require help with the English language. Of the eight students who attended the ELL workshops, two students reported being English first-language speakers, five reported being English language learners, and three reported being international students (Table 3). Focusing on international students from Asia, the survey responses indicate that they did not always identify themselves to be English Language learners. At the same time, domestic students can be ELL students. For instance, student W21-117 is an international student from Hong Kong who had been instructed in English through international school systems before arriving in Canada. The student did not identify themselves to be an ELL but attended the workshops because they wanted extra help with the course work. Meanwhile, students W21-284 and W21-251 both have Canadian citizenship; however, they were brought up in Japan and Mainland China before they returned to Canada for their university education and received little English language instruction. As a result, these domestic students struggled with the English language and identified themselves as ELL students.

Two students who identified as English first-language speakers also attended the workshop, but neither of them attended more than one session or provided feedback on their experience in the workshop. These English first-language speakers stood out from other students for being noticeably quiet and they avoided engaging with the TA and their peers during the one session they attended. In contrast, there was more participation from the other students (ELL and non-ELLs). Although withdrawn at first, most students became open and comfortably engaged with the TA and their peers in the workshop, in spoken and written English, on Zoom.

Feedback from students suggests that they found the workshops to be helpful in learning the course content of ANT101. Many of the students felt that the presence of other ELL students in the workshops made them less nervous and allowed them to engage more easily because they felt less “out of place.” One ELL student said:

“I like the atmosphere of the workshop; it is easy for me to get involved. When I know that there are other ELL students studying with me, I will not be as nervous as studying with a native speaker.”

The students also voiced that the low student-TA ratio in the workshop compared to the regular tutorial sessions was helpful to their learning. Notably, one student voiced that it was easier to communicate with the TA and shared the following: *“I like the workshop in a small size. The TA can help each of us because there is a small amount of people.”*

Mandarin-speaking ELL students noted that the presence of a TA who spoke their mother tongue encouraged them to attend the workshop. A few students pointed out that they sometimes felt unable to communicate their ideas clearly in English. In the workshops these students felt encouraged to know they could ask for some clarification of the material in their first language. Nonetheless, while the attending ELL students still had varying degrees of difficulty in English communication, all of them appeared to feel quite comfortable in engaging with their TA and peers in spoken and written English through the duration of the workshops.

Table 3

The Demographics, Workshop Attendance, and Grades of Students who Attended the ELL Workshops in Winter 2021

| Student | First language English Speaker | English Language Learner | International Student | First Language Spoken | Number of Workshops Attended | Workshop Sessions Attended | Final Grade |
|---------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------|
| W21-107 | No | Yes | Yes | Mandarin Chinese | 1 | 3 | 84 |
| W21-117 | No | No | Yes | Cantonese Chinese | 2 | 3, 4 | 80 |
| W21-251 | No | Yes | No | Mandarin Chinese | 3 | 1, 2, 4 | 82 |
| W21-284 | No | Yes | No | Japanese | 2 | 2, 3 | 92 |
| W21-287 | Yes | No | No | English | 1 | 2 | 72 |
| W21-299 | No | No | No | Cantonese Chinese | 2 | 2, 4 | 95 |
| W21-353 | Yes | No | No | English | 1 | 4 | 67 |
| W21-579 | No | Yes | Yes | Mandarin Chinese | 4 | 1, 2, 3, 4 | 83 |

Grades of Students who Attended the ELL Workshops

Every student who attended two or more of the workshops in Winter 2021 achieved a grade higher than the class average, regardless of the perception of their English language proficiency. The average grade of students who attended the workshops in Winter 2021 was about 82, roughly 5 points higher than the average in the class. English language proficiency varied among students who attended the workshops. In the surveys, four students (W21-117, W21-287, W21-299, and W21-353) indicated that they were confident, and another four students (W21-251, W21-284, W21-107, and W21-579) indicated they were not confident with their English language skills. Nonetheless, student confidence with their English language ability did not appear to correspond with their final grades for the course. One student (W21-284) who attended

two workshops and identified as a Japanese speaking ELL student, strongly believed that her limited fluency in English posed a barrier for her to succeed in the class. The student attended two workshops (#2 and #3) to seek help, and ultimately achieved a final grade of 92, significantly higher than both the class average and median. Three other Mandarin-speaking ELL students who attended the workshop also indicated in their surveys a lack of confidence in their English language skills. These three students also scored higher than the class average and median. Among the students who attended the workshops, the two students (W21-287 and W21-353) who struggled the most both indicated being domestic English speakers confident in their English language abilities. These two domestic students attended only one review session in the workshop before the mid-term test.

Discussion

Similar to earlier studies, Chinese international students in ANT101 felt less confident about their English language proficiency compared to domestic and non-Chinese international students (Dehaas, 2013; Trenkic, 2018; Xiao, in press). This supports the notion that language proficiency is an important factor in the learning experiences of Chinese ELL students in post-secondary institutions in Canada. However, the present study's results suggest that language proficiency is only one of many factors that should be considered when assessing international students' learning in the classroom. Language proficiency had no direct correlation with the final grade achieved by the students who attended the workshops. Rather, it appears that confidence in navigating the language of instruction was key and that attendance of the additional review sessions within the workshops alleviated students' doubts in their abilities to use English in an academic context.

Personal motivations and effective learning habits are important factors that could mitigate the effects of a lack of language proficiency and help international students achieve academic success. This was shown through the outcomes of ELL workshop attendance in the Winter 2021 iteration of ANT101 as reflected in the final grades achieved by attending students (see Table 3). Although attendance was low, ELL students who attended the workshops fared better academically than ELL students who did not. Every student who attended two or more workshops achieved a grade higher than the class average.

Creating a Positive Learning Environment for Students

Studies report that the spoken language barrier associated with Chinese identity often exerts psychological strain on ELL students as subtle messaging of negative Asian stereotypes may inhibit their confidence (Jao, 2013; Wang, 2009; Xiao, in press). Even when students can communicate clearly in English, they might be hesitant to do so in fear of being judged or ridiculed for not conveying "proper" forms of the language

(Xiao, in press). The workshops in this study aimed to enhance the learning experience of ELL students by focusing on course materials while providing a safe space for Chinese students to interact in Cantonese or Mandarin with their peers and a TA if needed to help with understanding of the course content. ELL students who attended the workshops reported that the presence of a TA that speaks their first learned language encourages their learning process. Moreover, the ELL students noted that knowing other ELL students in the course and being able to interact with them made them feel more comfortable and less “out of place.” This meant that the ELL students were more inclined to answer challenging questions and risk making mistakes compared to more traditional classrooms.

One of the defining features of culturally responsive pedagogies is the acknowledgment that personal identities, background stories, and experiences all play an important part in the learning experience (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In their study on student reception of culturally responsive curriculums, Kumar et al. (2019) note that students of different cultural backgrounds often develop contrasting learning experiences based on their affiliations to minoritized or dominant cultural groups in their classrooms. A similar phenomenon was seen in our study. While the ELL workshops appeared to be effective for ELL student learning in this course, they did not help the two struggling first language English-speaking students who came to seek help. The fact that workshop attendees were mainly ELL students might have made the two first language English-speaking students feel different and uncomfortable about their abilities as students, leading to their disengagement from the workshops after showing up only once.

Study Limitations and Future Research Avenues

One of the primary limitations of this study is its small sample size, which makes it challenging to distinguish between random variation and a cause-effect relationship regarding the variables. However, the findings of our study serve as a call to action for further research to investigate the connections between teaching resources, language barriers, comprehension, and academic success for English Language Learners (ELLs). Collecting additional data from multiple academic years and a variety of courses would provide valuable insights for developing better support systems for ELL students.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of factors contributing to ELL student academic success, more detailed interview studies could be conducted. Future research should consider a range of factors, including the role of peer support networks in the classroom, the amount of time spent studying, whether there is a history of family members attending academies or universities, and any other work that supports academic studies. By considering a broader range of factors, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of the factors that contribute to student academic achievement and identify potential areas for improvement.

This study primarily focused on Chinese ELL students because they are the largest international student population at the university and in international student enrollment in the course. However, it is important to recognize that strategies that cater specifically to Chinese ELL students might not have the same appeal to first language English-speaking students and ELL students of other cultural backgrounds. More research is needed to better understand how social identities affect learning attitudes and academic outcomes (Brown 2008; Ge et al., 2019; Huang & Brown 2009).

This study differed from broader WAC programs by focusing on the material of a specific university course. Previous studies have suggested that ELL students often feel that WAC programs do not adequately address their academic needs and overemphasize spelling and grammar (Cheng & Fox, 2008; Moore et al., 2016). Consequently, the revived workshops were designed to focus on helping ELL students develop reading and learning strategies and better understanding of the kind of information that would help them succeed in mastery of the course content, yielding immediate academic results. The ELL students also benefitted from the small TA-student ratio in the workshops, as the instructing TA could pay attention to each student's proficiency level and tailor support according to their individual learning needs. More studies are needed to evaluate the applicability of workshops in supporting ELL students across disciplines.

Conclusion

This study supports the prevailing idea that English language ability is a barrier for Chinese international students to perform well in coursework. However, our study also underlines that problems caused by lack of language fluency could be mitigated with course-specific material being taught in a culturally safe space with added access to assistance from teachers and interaction with peers in a small group learning environment. With support, ELL students can become more confident with their language abilities and achieve greater academic success.

This study also highlights that even when support is available to international students, students might not necessarily be motivated or able to access them. To better support and accommodate students, it would be prudent to investigate the underlying reasons why educational resources are not being used. This includes examining whether the resources are not easily accessible or if students are not aware of the benefits of using them.

Academic institutions and instructors must go beyond offering learning resources and adapt their teaching strategies to foster a culturally responsive learning environment. Students from different cultures studying abroad may feel out of place, resulting in isolation and disengagement from academic work. To help these students succeed, it is crucial to increase their confidence and facilitate their adaptation to their

new environment. This can be achieved through various approaches, including language support and mentorship programs. By implementing these strategies, we can foster equality and diversity in university settings and improve accommodations for students from diverse backgrounds.

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