Challenges in the Use of English for Academic Purposes among Selected Graduate Students of St. Paul University Manila's College of Education

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Abstract: This study examines challenges faced by Chinese graduate students at St. Paul University Manila when using English for academic purposes, aiming to enhance their academic performance. Thirteen students participated in an open-ended online survey regarding their English usage, and the responses underwent thorough analysis to identify and rank five major challenge categories: (1) Difficulty with words, (2) Not understanding English context, (3) Lack of frequent English use, (4) Listening difficulty, and (5) Difficulty expressing in English. The primary challenge, encompassing general and specific vocabulary issues, was difficulty with words. Not understanding English context and expressing in English shared the second spot, followed by lack of frequent English use and listening difficulty. These findings underscore the pressing need for interventions to alleviate the helplessness cycle experienced by Chinese graduate students using English for academics. While the Chinese government promotes graduate studies in English-speaking countries, addressing exposure and practice challenges in English is essential. This paper introduces St. Paul University Manila's Academic English Services Program (AESP), featuring three modules, with Module 2 (Reading) focusing on word familiarity in diverse contexts. However, solely relying on these modules may fall short, highlighting the importance of creating informal English exposure spaces on campus. Furthermore, educators should be equipped with tools to facilitate communication when English is impractical. Introducing a mobile app like Youdao for immediate Chinese-English translation can reduce language barriers, fostering comfortable interactions and increased English usage among Chinese graduate students at the university.

Keywords: English language, English exposure, English use, Chinese graduate students, English language for academic purposes

I.   Introduction

The initial institutions introducing English instruction were missionary schools situated in Macau during the early 17th century Song, 2023). The integration of English into China's educational framework commenced during the 1960s, coinciding with a decline in the prominence of Russian. Following a brief period of criticism during the Cultural Revolution, the teaching of English experienced a resurgence in the early 1970s, flourishing under the economic reform initiatives of Deng Xiaoping's administration. From the 1990s onward, English gained widespread popularity, particularly among individuals engaged in the fields of tourism and commerce.

Presently, the level of English proficiency within the Chinese population displays considerable diversity. As documented, English is a mandatory subject in schools across China, commencing at an early age for many Chinese students. Nevertheless, the extent of English language competence can significantly diverge among individuals and regions. For instance, urban areas, particularly major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, tend to exhibit higher levels of English proficiency, as Song (2023) has observed. This discrepancy arises from the pronounced emphasis on English education and the greater availability of educational resources in these urban centers. It is noteworthy that the Chinese educational system places substantial emphasis on English language acquisition, designating it as a fundamental component of the national curriculum, as highlighted by Qi (2016). Students are assessed in English as early as Grade 3, and English proficiency holds significance in their college entrance exams (Gaokao), which have far-reaching implications for their future educational and career prospects. Consequently, families with greater financial resources frequently opt for private English tutoring or enroll their children in international schools, where English serves as the primary medium of instruction, as indicated by Zhang and Xie (2016).

Access to English-language media, such as movies, TV shows, and the internet, has also contributed to English language exposure and learning opportunities among the Chinese population (Feng, 2011). China's role in the global economy and its growth in the tourism industry have increased the demand for English proficiency (Wang, Smyth, & Cheng, 2017), particularly in industries like business, tourism, and hospitality. The Chinese government has launched various initiatives to improve English education and proficiency levels across the country (Hu & McKay, 2012). These initiatives include training more English teachers and promoting English language learning in rural areas.

The study on Chinese Graduate Students in the College of Music and the Performing Arts of Bantugan (2022) revealed that students were particularly in need of assistance in the use of English. They needed "assistance related to English translation… (including) a teacher who knows Chinese who can help guide them (p. 178). This indicates that their English language competency is lower than what is required to successfully accomplish the tasks of graduate school education. Hence, the Academic English Services Program was set-up to address this need.

St. Paul University Manila set up the Academic English Services Program (AESP) under the College of Arts and Sciences to provide the necessary assistance to the Chinese graduate and undergraduate students who want to enroll in the university. The lead researcher of this paper was assigned last July 2023 to serve as the head of the program. Previously, he had nothing to do with the program, in terms of providing English learning sessions. The AESP, provides English learning sessions in collaboration with the General Education Program under the same college and basic English learning sessions under the Language Development Center (which is preparatory to the use of English for Academic Purposes). The AESP also provides thesis/dissertation editing services to students, especially to non-native English users.

Study Framework

This study is guided by the framework for the examination of second language learning inspired by Stern's (1983) second language learning model (Figure 1). This figure's "Learner Characteristics" points to the Chinese graduate students' characteristics, which together with the social context or being an international student in the Philippines, the learning conditions or the learning environment provided by St. Paul University Manila, and the learning process or the formal graduate education they undergo to finish their PHD in the College of Education shape their language "learning outcomes". This study considers the participants' English proficiency as part of their characteristics. However, the difficulties in their use of English for academic purposes is considered as a function not just of learner characteristics but also their being on- and off-campus in the Philippines. Hence, to optimize English language learning outcomes for the Chinese graduate students in St. Paul University Manila, their social context, learning process, and learning conditions must be considered.
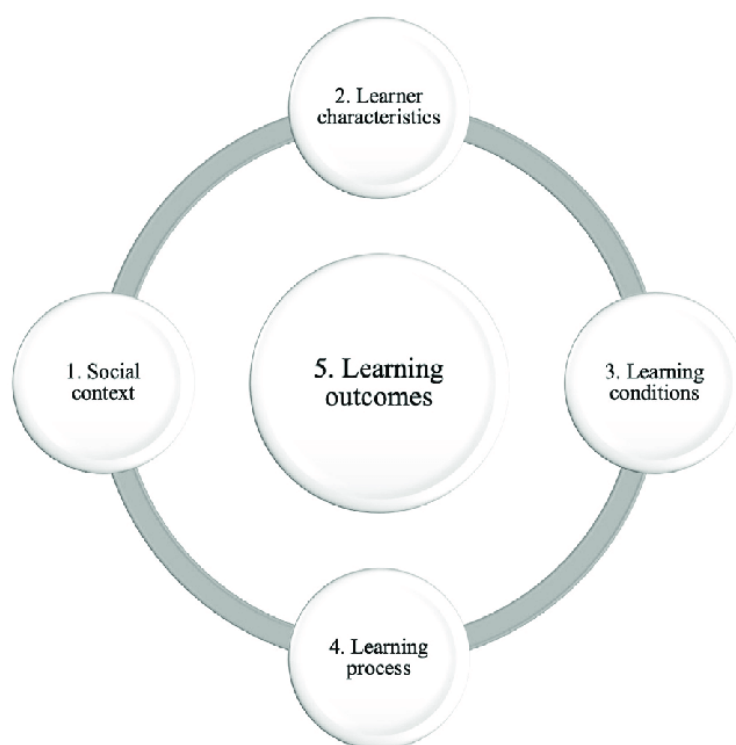
Figure 1. Framework for the examination of second language learning inspired by Stern's (1983) second language learning model (in Arigita-García, 2021)

Statement of the Problem. This study aimed to identify the challenges of the Chinese graduate students in using English for their graduate education in St. Paul University Manila. By doing this, the university will be better able to make the graduate students accomplish more and satisfy their course requirements at a higher level.

II.   Methodology

Thirteen students from a Dissertation Writing class of the lead author of this paper volunteered to answer an online open-ended Google Form pertaining to their English use in the university. Their responses were read at least three times and textually analyzed to arrive at categories of difficulties when using English in their academic program. The responses were clustered under each category and further processed using content analysis to arrive at the most and least expressed difficulties in the use of English. The categorized responses were further analyzed through thematic analysis to arrive at sub-categories. Finally, given the different categories and their ranks, models were created to represent the relationship of the expressed difficulties in English and surface the underlying problems from which they arise.

III.   Results

After coding the responses of the participants, five categories emerged as answers to the greatest challenge of the participants in using English in graduate school is St. Paul University Manila: (1) Difficulty with words; (2) Not understanding English context; (3) Lack of frequent use of English; (4) Listening difficulty; and (5) Difficulty with expressing in English. Content analysis of the qualitative responses revealed that the greatest difficulty was difficulty with words (Rank 1), followed by (Ranks 2.5 each) not understanding English context and difficulty with expressing in English, and (Ranks 4.5 each) lack of frequent use of English and listening difficulty.

Difficulty with words

Narratives falling under this category were essentially expressing two ideas (sub-categories): (1) Difficulty with general or non-specific vocabulary and (2) Difficulty with Specific (Technical, Academic, or Professional) vocabulary.

Difficulty with general or non-specific vocabulary. Responses under this sub-category were expressed in two ways. First, a participant said, "lack of vocabulary" was the greatest difficulty for him/her/them. This meant that the participant had very limited exposure to English before coming to St. Paul University Manila. Second, a participant expressed not remembering English words saying, "many words have been forgotten (by me)."

Difficulty with specific (technical, academic, or professional) vocabulary. Responses under this sub-category indicated specific types of vocabulary, or those used only in specific circles of practice, are found more challenging based on frequency of mention as shown below. Given that technical, professional, and academic terms are even less frequently used than colloquial ones in the mainstream media in English-speaking countries, one can expect the situation to be worse in countries like China.

"I don't know many **technical words."**

"... use of **professionalwords** differs from some language expressions."

"Many **academicterms**are not clear."

Too many **technical terms."**

Difficulty with English context

The same could be said for context-related difficulties. Context, or the situation in which an event, statement, or idea takes place, and through which it can be comprehensively understood and evaluated, adds another layer of difficulty in understanding words. This difficulty fell under two sub-categories: (1) **Difficulty with general or non-specific contexts; and (2) Difficulty with specific contexts.**

Difficulty with general or non-specific contexts. A participant expressed general or non-specific context-related difficulty by saying, "I don't understand the context." This indicates that with the very little vocabulary they know, their lack of exposure to contexts that make them more easily comprehensible, render them more as a challenge than convenience in their use of English in academic settings.

Difficulty with specific contexts. Meanwhile, specific English contexts are even more less accessible to the participants in that they hardly use context-dependent vocabulary in their academic settings in China. Hence, the responses below:

There is no English **context** in China.

I don't understand **academic** English.

(I don't understand…) **cultural** differences.

Difficulty with expressing in English

This was manifested by three sub-categories, namely: (1) **Challenged with non-specific presentation in English** [("I have great difficulty with) presentation (in English)"; "I can't express what I want to express (in English)"]; (2) **Challenged with speaking in English** ["Not very good at… speaking (in English)"]; and (3) **Challenged with writing in English** [(My English) writing level needs to be improved."].

Listening Difficulty

This difficulty was expressed by two participants. Both admit having "not good" or "not very good" listening skills. This meant not being able to recognize sounds accurately leading to not being able to process words as sounds (not listening good enough to recognize them as familiar words with a set of possible meanings one can immediately decide on given a specific context).

Lack of frequent use of English

Participants admitted to not using English frequently. One participant noted that he/she/they "rarely" used English and the other confessed to not having used it "for so many years". This indicates that they found no need to actually use English despite their knowledge of the language. As a result, their English language competency was diminished or lost.

IV.   Discussions

The participants' responses highlighted two significant areas of concern. Firstly, there were challenges related to acquiring language skills, as depicted in Figure 2. Secondly, there were difficulties in utilizing the language effectively, as illustrated in Figure 3, which in turn exacerbated the issues related to language acquisition. This situation gives rise to a cycle of frustration that necessitates attention from the university.

An analysis was conducted to establish connections among the five constructed categories, revealing that listening difficulties were connected to challenges with vocabulary comprehension and a lack of understanding of English context. These three aspects, as depicted in Figure 2, all revolved around exposure to the English language. In Figure 3, the other two categories were interconnected, as they both pertained to the practical application of English proficiency among the students.

The two figures reveal that the difficulties or challenges mentioned by the participants are rooted in (1) lack of exposure and (2) lack of practice. Both must be addressed to break the cycle of helplessness, especially in the context of graduate studies. While the Chinese government attempts to address this encouraging and requiring students in higher education institutions in China to pursue graduate studies in English-speaking countries or countries using English as a language of instruction, there is much that could be done to further help the Chinese graduate students in terms of exposure to and use of English for academic advancement.
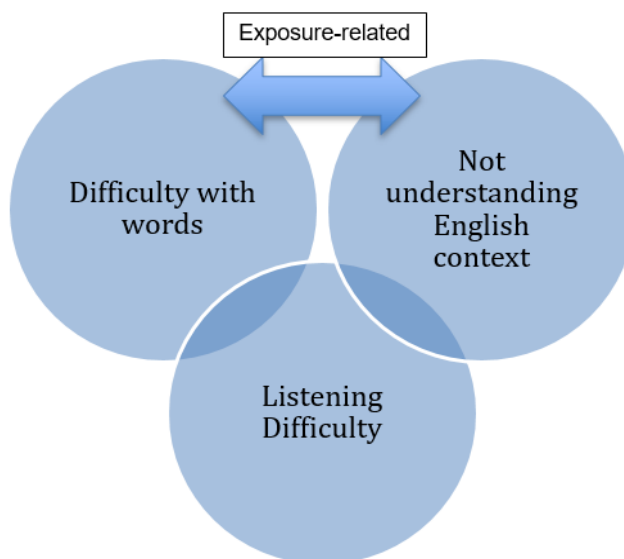

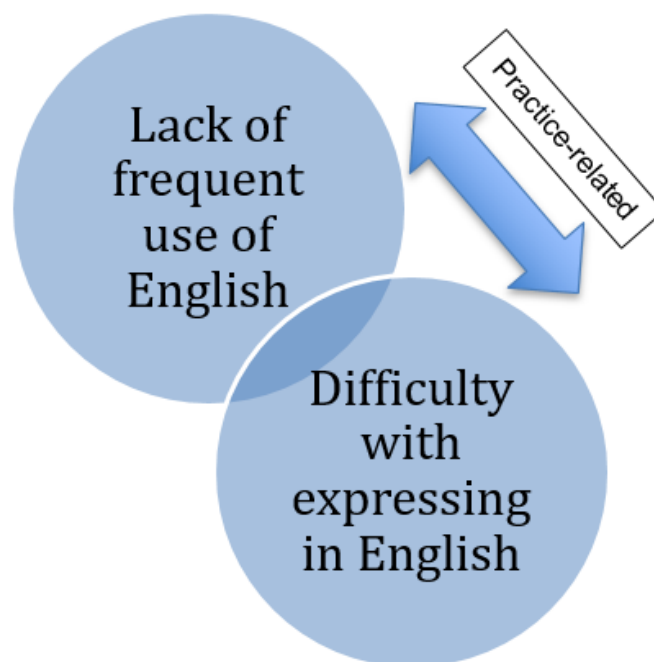*Figure 1.* Language Acquisition Difficulties

Figure 2. Language Use Difficulties

Presently, the AESP offers three modules to individuals who demonstrate sufficient English proficiency by passing the diagnostic examination. These modules are categorized as Module 1 (Speaking), Module 2 (Reading), and Module 3 (Writing). These modules have been devised and are administered by qualified English Language experts. Each student is required to allocate 40 hours to the module recommended for them. Successful completion of Module 3 signifies readiness for enrollment in their chosen academic program.

Of these modules, Module 2 (Reading) plays a pivotal role in fostering language familiarity, particularly in understanding word usage within specific contexts. In this module, the instructor provides audio or spoken content for students to match with the corresponding written text. The remaining two modules are primarily geared towards practical English language usage.

Considering the pressing need to expand vocabulary, enhance familiarity with corresponding phonetics, and grasp the contextual nuances of word usage for comprehensive comprehension, it appears that relying solely on three modules may fall short. However, introducing an additional module could potentially undermine the cost-effectiveness of university enrollment. Consequently, a new challenge arises: offering elective avenues for Chinese graduate students to bolster their word proficiency and employ language skills beyond the confines of classrooms. To address this, informal and passive English exposure spaces should be established on campus.

Moreover, educators of these students should be equipped with tools to navigate interactions when English is not viable, thus minimizing disruptions in on-campus engagements. A viable solution could involve mandating teachers and staff members to utilize a mobile phone application like Youdao, which offers instantaneous translation between Chinese and English. This approach can significantly mitigate communication breakdowns stemming from language barriers or gaps. By fostering comfortable, albeit language-challenged interactions, greater English usage can be encouraged, which can consequently reduce communication anxieties among Chinese graduate students within the university.

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