

Successful transitions: China – Australia postgraduate learning in media and communication



Briefing note

WHY CHINESE POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS STRUGGLE WITH LISTENING, SPEAKING, READING AND WRITING IN ENGLISH

The first thing to know here is that students struggle because this is exactly how they have learnt and used the English language previously – **separately**. Chinese students have little experience of using English interactively or multimodally.

The second thing to appreciate is that they don't have the same cultural reference points to guide the use of the English language. Chinese students have limited experience with real English (although this is changing with increasing use of the Internet and social media) so they have very little understanding of how English reflects and expresses the culture of Australians who use it.

Language mode	The experiences that Chinese postgraduate students bring to their study in Australia
<p>Reading</p>	<p>The teaching and learning of English in China focuses heavily on grammatical knowledge. Students are encouraged to learn information about grammatical rules rather than make meaning from what they read.</p> <p>When given English material to read, Chinese students are encouraged to focus on decoding the separate words that make up sentences. They use grammatical rules to try to read texts in the same way that they would work out a puzzle or a mathematical equation. As a result, they view English texts as some sort of code that needs to be cracked. It's rather like opening a safe. The problem is that once the safe is open they often don't know what to do. They have difficulty understanding the broader meaning of the material they read, even though they can understand the words that make up the text and are very often able to reproduce what they read exactly. Unfortunately, this approach to reading does not foster the ability to read deeply or critically. To go back to our 'safe' analogy – because of the way they have been taught English, Chinese students very often don't know how to extract and use the contents of the safe even though they have cracked the code.</p> <p>It is also important to appreciate that even when required to read English for meaning in Chinese educational contexts, teachers commonly require them to focus on the retrieval of factual / literal information from the text. An explanation proffered for this is so that the 'correctness' or 'perfection' of the answers can be easily judged.</p> <p>There are a couple of other factors to be considered to help appreciate why Chinese students find reading in English demanding. Reading in English in China generally means reading a single textbook. Also, Chinese students have little experience in reading large amounts of information from multiple sources that may express conflicting viewpoints.</p>

	<p>You can guarantee, however, that your Chinese students will know a great deal more about the grammar of the English language than you ever will. Did you know that there are 16 tenses in the English language? And how good is your knowledge of restrictive and non-restrictive attributive clauses? Your Chinese students will have a very thorough understanding of these, and of the other rules of English grammar.</p>
<p>Writing</p>	<p>Essays are the mainstay of academic assessment in Australian universities and being able to write them is an essential skill for success within the university environment. For Chinese students, however, writing academic essays, in English, using the conventions expected, will most likely be a new experience. In fact, it is important to understand that the value of writing and the processes associated with it in China are very different. There are a number of aspects of writing that will largely be unfamiliar for Chinese students studying in Australia:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exams are the principal form of assessment in China and therefore there is not the same requirement for students to write extensively in the Chinese language let alone in English. Students will be accustomed to writing short assignments in English, usually no more than a couple of hundred words. They will be unaccustomed to writing English language essays comprising several thousand words. • The style of essay writing is also different. Persuasive writing in Chinese is not linear and does not have the same conventions as in English. The conventions are quite different and have interesting names such as <i>double-harness</i> and <i>linked pearl</i>. • Conventions of essay writing in China do not prioritise referencing in the same way that we do in Australia. In fact, scholarship continues very often to be reflected through historicity and the use of literary language. Do not be surprised to see essays where the language used is flowery and ornate and where there is an overuse of adjectives as well as extensive use of clichés and proverbs. These attributes are valued in Chinese writing and have been

	<p>for a very long time.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The style of teaching and learning in China discourages students from expressing their own voice in their writing. Therefore, this may not have been a significant part of their experience prior to coming to Australia. Becoming comfortable with voicing their opinions and reflecting critically on the academic content they encounter will require guidance and encouragement. Being able to identify explicitly where this is needed will be useful for students. Initially this may need to be done by academics so that ultimately students can develop this skill themselves. • And, of course, there is the issue of discipline specific knowledge. There is no guarantee that students will come with discipline knowledge in English. It will be important to be aware of this so that you can help your students build a glossary that they can access and use to support their learning. <p>It is also useful to understand the importance handwriting has had within China and in English language learning in China. The quality of handwriting is important. Assessment of handwriting has been traditionally prioritised over content. This practice is linked to traditional values - <i>handwriting shows everything. It's your other face without clothes – it shows the inside of you.</i> With the use of word processing the presentation of documents is still perceived as being important, sometimes more so than the contents of an assignment.</p>
<p>Listening</p>	<p>In China, at all levels of education, reading and writing are prioritised over listening and speaking. In fact, it is often the case that listening activities are consigned to out of class time for completion by students on their own, with little scrutiny of what, and how much listening has been done. Because of this Chinese students tend to have had limited opportunities to listen to English, particularly authentic English and English that expresses discipline specific knowledge.</p>

	<p>Another challenge for Chinese students is that the listening that they have engaged in is very often one-way with no requirement for spontaneous response or interaction with other listeners and speakers. Chinese students are unused to participating in extensive academic dialogue in English. This is a very significant issue for Chinese students in Australia, particularly in seminar contexts where there is an expectation that students interact spontaneously with other students and with their lecturer. Having to operate in real time without being able to go back and listen again is daunting.</p> <p>This situation is further compounded by the fact that it is quite usual for an informal style of language to be used in the Australian seminar context. This can be quite confronting for Chinese students who will have little idea what is meant by phrases such as 'hang on a minute', 'what you are proposing is a complete dog's breakfast'.</p>
<p>Speaking</p>	<p>This is the least practised of the language skills. The sheer number of students studying English in China makes the practising and assessing of spoken English a logistical nightmare. Because of this it is not undertaken with sufficient frequency to support the development of fluent spoken English. Also, even when assessed, it tends to be undertaken in circumstances that are more reflective of monologue than conversation. The issue of spontaneous oral interaction again emerges as a significant challenge for students when undertaking study here in Australia.</p> <p>Apart from the logistical problems associated with learning to speak English in China there is also the issue of the value assigned to speaking within academic contexts. There is little requirement for students to participate in this way. Again, the focus on examinations prioritises other ways of demonstrating knowledge and ability within Chinese university contexts.</p>

Academics in Australia have certain expectations of what it means to be a proficient user of academic English. The information provided above is intended to help academics appreciate why the work of Chinese postgraduate coursework students often conflicts with lecturer expectations. The academic learning context in China is different. What it means to be a proficient user of language is also different. How one gets to be proficient is also at odds with beliefs commonly held in Australia. We need to appreciate that both students and their teachers in China tend to believe that learners' English proficiency is built on the teacher's lectures rather than on the students' own practice (Wen & Clement, 2003). We need to appreciate the impact this has on the way Chinese students view their learning experiences. We also need to guard against interpreting difficulties with using academic English as being reflective of either a lack of ability or criticality (Ryan, 2013, p.43). The way we do things around here and the way things are done in China are just different.

Reference list

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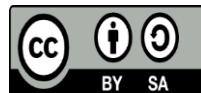
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