

CHINESE STUDENTS' SELF-EVALUATION OF THEIR STUDY SKILLS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND OVERSEAS COURSES

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ABSTRACT

Study skills underpin English language learning but within the EFL classroom there is likely to be marked variation in abilities due to different educational frameworks across countries. In the Chinese education system, for example, there are comparatively fewer opportunities to develop study skills and this situation raises important dialogue about how Chinese students' needs differ from their classmates (from other countries), the level of support instructors should provide, and about students' preparedness to study overseas where study skills are integral components. This presentation reports a study in which 125 undergraduate Chinese students evaluated their own study skills. Their ability on each skill was rated from 1–4 (4 denoted the highest ability). Results revealed that no study skill achieved the highest rating, however, essay writing, report writing, organisational skills and revision/exam technique achieved an average score of 3. Oral presentation was the lowest rated skill. This profile was discussed in relation to the nature of the Chinese education system, the lack of study skills development in current EFL curricula in China, and cultural background. The results suggest that Chinese students may lack skills that are necessary for both English language learning, and overseas courses. Instructors should place extra emphasis on understanding variations in students' skills as a result of nationality and culture.

INTRODUCTION

Methods of teaching and learning vary across countries and this difference partly underpins the divergence in students' academic skills' profiles within the EFL classroom. An important difference between educational provision in China and in Western countries, and one that we will focus on in this paper, is the prevalence of study skills instruction. Study skills are qualities that help students to improve their learning and are therefore essential for both English language development, and success in other subjects. When assessing work, university examiners not only look for subject knowledge, but also assess abilities to structure essays and reports, form arguments and read critically, present information orally and verbally, participate in group work, and demonstrate exam technique; in order to develop these skills, other qualities such as time-management, note-taking, reflective learning and coping with stress are essential for academic achievement. Therefore success in learning English, or any other subject, does not solely depend on subject knowledge; rather, performance is based on the ability to utilise study skills (Cottrell 2003; Sinfield and Burns 2003). In countries such as North America and Britain, study skills development is a compulsory and integral component of most Higher Education courses. In contrast, the Chinese education system, including EFL provision, attaches less importance and there is a noticeable absence of courses (and associated literature) tailored towards study skills development.

Variation in academic skills across countries also has implications for the increasing number of Chinese students studying abroad. During the past decade, the higher education sector in China has undergone resurgence and growth as a consequence of a shift from state monopoly to a market economy (Qiang, 2002). Chinese students now have more opportunities to pursue a private higher education at overseas universities (a popular choice, especially among the growing middle-class). To respond to this market demand, more Western education institutions are

entering China's private education market, mainly to recruit students to study abroad, and also to provide courses in partnership with Chinese institutions. The importance of study skills in overseas courses and English language learning, and their absence in China, raises important dialogue about the preparedness of Chinese students (who are the end product of the Chinese education system) who study within Western frameworks.

The diversity of educational curricula between China and the West means that it is difficult to judge which skills students have developed (and at what level) and those that need to be learnt, and developed further. To address this issue, we describe the results of a exploratory and preliminary research project aimed at understanding the study skills' profiles of Chinese students. Understanding this issue is important to ensure that Chinese students studying English, or embarking on overseas courses, are fully equipped with the necessary skills to complete their studies. We hope this research will act as a primer for further work.

METHOD

Participants and Study location

Participants were undergraduate Chinese students enrolled on British degree courses provided in China. The University of Central Lancashire, based in the North West of England, accredits two undergraduate engineering degree courses that are franchised to Shenzhen University; the franchise is not part of the Chinese state education system and is therefore classed as private higher education. The courses are taught and examined in English, and therefore English language support is an important part of the course. Students study the course at Shenzhen University for the first two years and then transfer to a British campus for the third year. The interaction between the two universities provides a unique opportunity to explore the needs of Chinese students studying overseas courses and EFL.

Questionnaires

Fact-finding discussions were held with educational professionals and students in China (students, school teachers, university lecturers, a head teacher and native English speakers teaching English). The discussions revealed that courses devoted entirely to study skills development are rare in China, both in government and private educational institutions, and none of the Chinese participants had conducted a study skills audit. The meetings also revealed that although some skills (especially report and article writing) are practised in Chinese schools, many other study skills are not. Also, students reported lack of knowledge about study skills, and teachers felt there should be more emphasis in university and school curricula on study skills.

A popular approach to identifying strengths and weaknesses associated with learning is to ask students to evaluate their own abilities. Accordingly, 125 students on the degree courses were asked to self-assess their study skills (commonly known as a "skills audit"). The skills covered in the questionnaires were note-taking, oral presentation, time-management, report and essay writing, revision and exam technique, problem solving, critical analysis, team work, coping with stress/pressure, negotiating/assertiveness and action planning. The students rated their ability in each study skill using a scale of 1–4 (where 4 denoted the highest ability). The students were asked to briefly justify the main reasons for their highest- and lowest-rated skill.

RESULTS

A group of Chinese students were asked to evaluate their own abilities in a variety of study skills and the average group score of each skill is shown in Figure 1. The results show that no skill achieved a mean score of 4 (=very good), however, essay writing, report writing, organisational

skills and revision/exam technique all achieved an average score of 3 (=good). Oral presentation was the lowest rated skill because it received a score of 1, whereas all other skills received a score of 2. The students were also asked to rate the priority of improving each skill. They felt that essay and report writing, information management and group work required least improvement, whereas action planning, negotiation/assertiveness, oral presentation, seminar work and solving problems needed most improvement. To identify reasons for this difference, students provided explanations for their ratings. Most students attributed poor oral presentation skills to lack of experience (53%), lack of confidence or fear (26%), concerns about criticism by others (11%), and concerns about communicating in English (10%). Almost every student reported that they were good at examinations because they had ample experience in high school and therefore knew how to prepare for them.

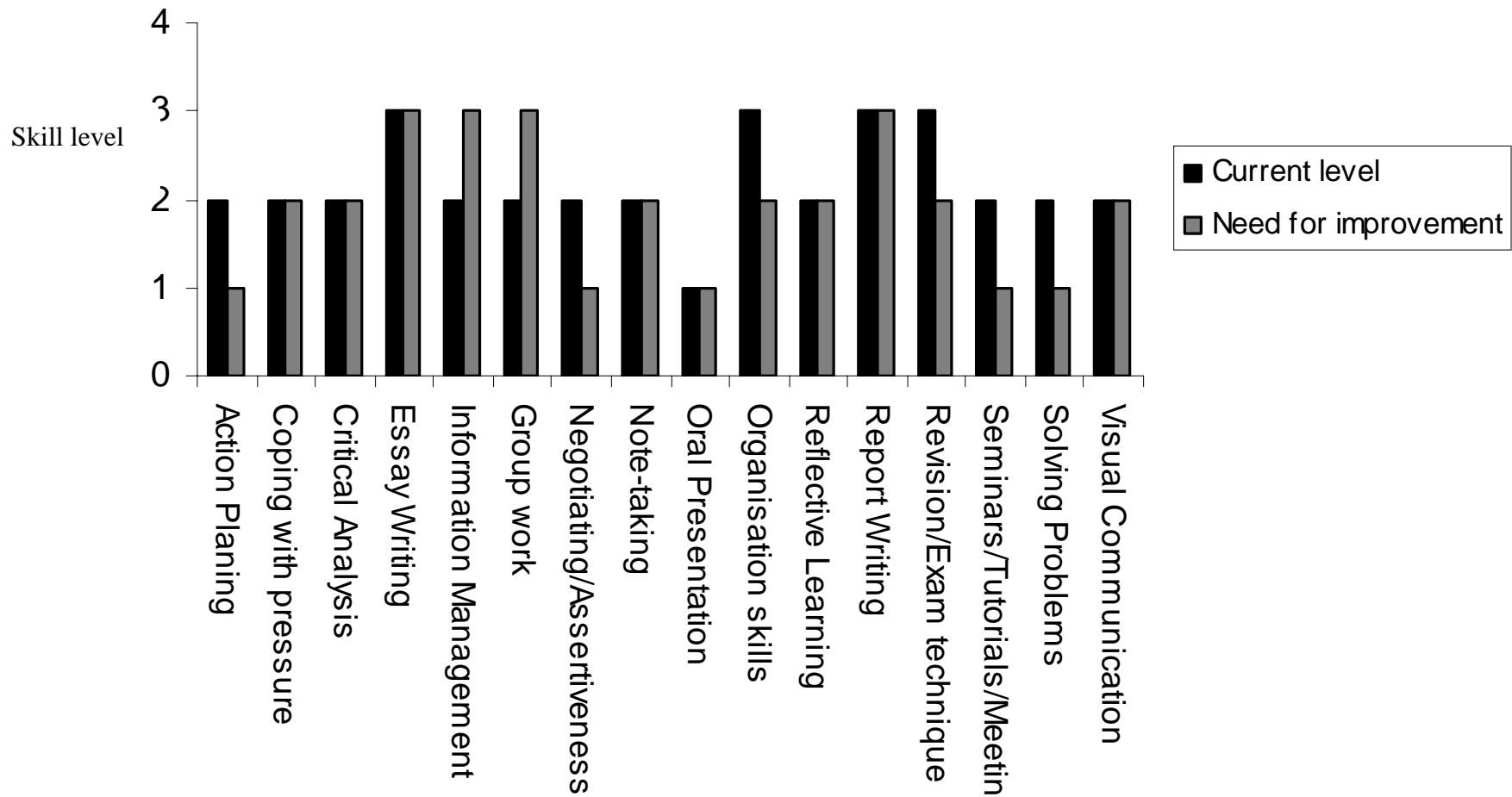


Figure 1. Study skills' profile of Chinese students. The current level of each skill was evaluated using a 4 point scale, where 1 = "very good" and 4 = "in need of considerable improvement". Students were also asked to rate the priority associated with improving each skills; 1 = "very important to improve" and 4 = "not important to improve".

DISCUSSION

Chinese students reported low abilities, and moderate need for improvement, for most study skills. Some skills received higher ratings than others; essay writing, report writing, organisational skills and revision/exam technique were the highest ranking qualities, whereas oral presentation received the lowest score. The reasons students gave for their ratings, along with information given in preliminary discussions with education professionals, seem to suggest that the skills profile reflects the nature of the Chinese education system. Chinese schools and universities provide ample opportunities to develop some skills (such as writing and revision/exam technique), but fewer chances to develop other skills such as critical analysis, solving problems, reflective learning and oral presentation. For example, one student wrote "I'm good at exams, all Chinese people can do them, but I've never heard of reflective learning". This result would benefit from further analysis of Chinese learning and teaching methods. There may also be cultural reasons for the variation in abilities; for example, students reported that their low oral presentation ability was based on fear, lack of confidence and concerns about criticism by others. This supports previous research showing that the greatest fear amongst Chinese university students is speaking or performing in public (Higgins 2004; Davey and Higgins 2005), perhaps related to China's collectivist culture in which there is greater emphasis on conforming to group norms and less individualism. Again, further work is needed to confirm this proposition, especially since British students also express high fear of presenting information to an audience (Higgins 2004).

Although tentative, the findings have significance for English language provision, and student support on overseas courses. Study skills are essential qualities for learning but our research suggests that many of the students' skill levels were low. English language courses in China focus on attaining language fluency but may not help students to develop study skills that are necessary to maximise learning effectiveness. Students may not be adequately prepared for studying abroad, where study skills are necessary. This situation could explain common issues that face international students, including communication difficulties, weak social skills, tendency to conform to groups with students from the same country, lack of self-confidence, failure to learn as much as expected, stress and also disillusionment (Heikinheimi and Shute 1986; Suzuki 1983; Elkins 1994; Feng 1991; Wan 2001). The next step is to use the information presented in this paper to develop possible solutions to remedy the situation. The most obvious solution is to introduce study skills development into EFL curricula, or for students on preparatory courses for overseas study. Further, institutions could consider providing additional support for international students.

The results also have significance for students graduating from Chinese universities. Study skills are called "transferable" skills because they can be used in different situations outside university. Enterprises require graduates who can communicate effectively, work in teams and can organize themselves. For this reason, a large proportion of graduates in America and Britain apply for jobs not directly related to their major – careers such as management, accounting, local government and others are popular choices in which transferable skills are important. It could be that the skills' profiles of graduates in China markedly differ from their counterparts in Western countries. This is an issue because the increasingly global job market (many foreign organisations have a presence in China) means that Chinese graduates must be equipped with skills that match those of graduates in other countries. China's talent pool is playing a fundamental role in the modernisation and subsequent emergence of the country as a leading nation in the world. Yet, many firms in China complain that graduates leave university without skills needed in the workplace.

The research discussed in this paper is limited in several respects. It was conducted in the spirit of a preliminary and exploratory study and therefore the results, and their interpretation, are tentative and lack academic rigour. Another problem hinges on different cultural interpretations of study skills (even though definitions and explanations of skills were provided in this study to minimize this problem). For example, in China some people may think they have good "problem solving" skills because they have *guanxi* (personal relationships and social networks), whereas in the UK and America, problem solving represents a defined procedure, that involves collection and analyzing information, creative thinking, group work and implementation of solutions. It is also important to point out that the sample consisted of engineering students and their background in

science and technology may have influenced their abilities; consequently, the skills' profile described in this paper may not represent students from other departments.

The research presented in this paper is important because it demonstrates that Chinese students skill levels may not be sufficient for effective English language learning, and studying abroad. There are ample avenues for further work. Further research on this topic might include cross-cultural comparisons of skills' abilities; investigating how particular teaching strategies or materials promote the development of study skills in China, assessing the impact of study skills' courses on academic performance and assessing graduates' skills in relation to the changing needs of employers. There are many avenues for further enquiry and it is hoped that this paper will serve as a primer for further work

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