

Chinese students' linguistic and cultural adjustment to total English immersion
in the United States, 1988-89.
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We need more living English *** I had studied English for about 5 years in Japan ... but, when I came her (U-S-A-), I really could not talk in English enough. I found the reason ... in Japan, I had English teachers who had Japanese nationality, so teachers taught us English with Japanese pronunciation. then pronunciation of my English was as same as what we use for Japanese speaking.

These and other comments of Japanese high school students in the United States under sponsorship of the Youth for Understanding International Scholarships revealed that their instructional preparation in Japan for total English immersion in the United States was inadequate for the constant use of English that they experienced during a year long residence here. (Gurney, 1984). Unpublished) The students lived with American families and attended American high schools from August 1983 to June 1984. At the end of their stay, the majority of the students had developed a very viable competency in spoken English. Others still were having considerable difficulties with communicative skills, especially oral/aural skills. Subsequent reports in Japanese newspapers criticized English instruction in Japan in terms of its heavy emphasis on preparing for college entrance exams and the inability of many graduates of Japanese schools to speak English well. (Japan Times, 8/1/85; The Daily Yomiuri, 8/7-8/85).

General descriptions of Chinese instructional methodology indicate that learning English in China is not very different from learning English in Japan. That is, there is a high reliance on translation from English into the native language in order to understand the rules of grammar and in order to pas the basically reading types of examinations. In Japan, vocabulary was memorized with Japanese definitions, according to student who responded to the YOU survey, and little use of language for normal communication was required or was apparent from their responses to questions concerning these aspects of their English instruction. (Similar findings had been reported in a study of American Field Service high school students in the United States. Gurney, 1970).

Although college level students might appear to differ from high school students in certain regards (dedication to careers, maturity, knowledge, etc., and particularly in their circle of friends), the challenge to use English with native speakers of the language presents the same test of second language competence. Previous studies of college students have indicated that college students experience some of the same kinds

of linguistic difficulties in total immersion that have been mentioned. (Gurney, 1977 and Rowland 1982, unpublished.) In addition, international college students have more opportunities to speak their own language with students from the same country (contrary to the high school student who is surrounded by English speakers without much option to converse in his/her home language.) Furthermore, college classes do not, usually, offer the kind of interaction between students and with teachers that is common in high school. Therefore, college students may not experience the regularity of difficulty reported by the high school students in the two previous studies, or they may not perceive difficulties as readily due to the nature of the college context and college level assignments.

In considering Chinese students, we were interested in expanding the work with Asian students begun in the YOU study, and, potentially, to develop a research effort with a very broad sample since over two thousand Chinese students are in the United States in any given year. It was hoped that cooperation from one or two national Chinese universities would lead to cooperation with the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in doing such a broad study later. Depending on the findings, it was anticipated that insights from such research would lead to supporting suggestions for improvement in the kinds of methodology used to teach English as a Foreign Language in Chinese universities and schools.

Communications with the president of Tianjin University (Tianjin, PRC), Professor Yong-She Wu, resulted in a favorable response to an invitation to conduct a study of the linguistic and cultural adjustment of their graduate students enrolled in various universities in the United States during the 1988-99 academic year. In addition, we proposed to offer suggestions and possible workshops to improve English language education based on our finding. Mrs. Life Can, Vice Section Chief of Graduate Studies, who oversees the Graduate English preparation program, accepted our invitation to come to the University of Central Florida as a visiting scholar to facilitate the research effort in which the University of Tianjin had agreed to participate.

According to Ms. Can, ten years ago, no English was taught in elementary schools. Even now, only English is taught in elementary schools in few large cities, such as: Shanghai, Beijing and Tianjin, etc. English requirements for students in middle school are the ability to read, and master English grammar. Students in college are required to be able to read materials in English in their major fluently and to do some simple translation from Chinese into English. Competence in understanding and speaking is not required. For graduate students, however, basic abilities of understanding and speaking English are necessary.

The English ability of foreign students also depends on their teachers' knowledge of English and training skills. There is almost no English teacher in high schools whose native language is English, nor in most colleges, except in some famous universities (Tianjin University included). English is spoken in English class most of the time but not after class. The facilities for English instruction are not enough to train students adequately in the skills of understanding and speaking. College students listen to English recordings often, however, they have no chance to listen to tapes or see films in English. Concern for the national examination in English, plus concentration on reading, writing and grammar in university examinations, discourages students from paying more attention to their understanding and speaking abilities. Oral tests are given to graduate students only. All the above mentioned reasons result in Chinese students being short of skills of understanding and speaking.

As the policy of reforming and opening its society has been carried on in China, and due to new developments in modern science and technology, it is more and more urgent for Chinese professors, engineers, business men, as well as officers, to have competence in various foreign languages especially English skills: speaking, understanding, reading and writing. In fact, China has sent thousands of students and visiting scholars abroad in the past 10 years to study and to do research. Many foreign scholars have been invited to China to teach and do research. Business men from many other countries come to China to set up businesses. In order to meet the needs of China's as a developing country, it is necessary to improve the kinds of methodology used to teach foreign language in schools. In order to meet the needs of China as a developing country. Therefore, the suggested research purpose was seen as a helpful way to revitalize the methods of teaching English in Chinese colleges, middle schools and elementary schools.

Mrs. Can brought addresses of over 140 graduate students of Tianjin University currently studying at more than 120 universities in the United States. In addition, she had procured the cooperation of another university in Tianjin, Nancy University, and had addresses for 38 students from this university.. The total example was 158 students.

The insights from the study by the principal investigator on the linguistic and cultural adjustment of Japanese high school students in the United States were consistent with results from a similar effort concerning American Field Service high school students in the United States from 13 different countries, representing five major world regions, during the 1979-80 academic year. The findings in the FS study

coincided with YOU concerns about students from Japan and a few other countries who seemed to experience particularly high levels of difficulty in adjusting to total immersion. The YOU organization was interested in gaining insights which could point to ways to improve participant selection and orientation, training and materials development. The ultimate goal was to ensure a more satisfactory exchange experience for Japanese students in the future.

Other findings from the 1970 and 1984 research reports are reviewed below as a background to the study of the Chinese graduate students' adjustment in the United States.

1. Immersion adjustment* was significantly associated with length of English study for those whose experienced least difficulties of understanding, speaking, reading and writing (*length of adjustment was inversely related to length of study of English with significance at $p (.05.)$);
2. Adjustment difficulties (understanding, speaking, reading and writing English) revealed correlations similar to those above. Such difficulties were common to the foreign students but were highly differentiated depending upon length of the adjustment period and having natives of the students' home countries as English teachers;
3. A pattern emerged for students experiencing greatest English difficulties and slowest adjustment which included, among other things, highest level of interaction with indigenous teachers of English and less instruction involving conversational use of English.
4. There appears to be no combination of language preparation factors significantly related to short periods of adjustment. However, analyses in the AFS study revealed a very significant adjustment. However, analyses in the AFS study revealed a very inverse relationship between the length of study of a foreign language other than English and the period of adjustment, as well as areas of difficulty.
5. During total immersion, students received more help from other students than from adults, especially teachers.
6. Almost of the AFS students with the poorest adjustment were from Thailand and Japan and 30% of the Japanese YOU students indicated that they were not able, by their own estimation, to use English comfortably within the research period (first 45 weeks in the U.S.).

These and other findings on foreign high school students reinforce findings from a variety of research reports on foreign students in U.S. colleges, such as the strong relationship between the study of another foreign language and English vocabulary scores, but no significant relationship of vocabulary to the length of English study; inadequate English preparation in Egypt, Afghanistan, and Pakistani; remedial training needed by college students in spite of an average of more than three years of English study in the home country; scholastic achievement of Far Eastern, as well as Latin American graduate students experienced greater difficulties in adjustment to their new challenges than other foreign students; Vocabulary size for non-Indo-European students was the lowest of all scores when arranged by region; students in Afghanistan spent so many years with Afghan natives as teachers that they developed linguistic habits with potentially permanent incomprehension to native speakers of English; South East Asian students' linguistic difficulties were primarily noticed in giving oral presentations and engaging in giving oral presentations and engaging in group discussion, writing (assigned papers, themes, research papers, etc.) and taking notes, understanding class discussion, and reading test questions or directions (combination of responses: SOMETIMES, OFTEN, MOST OF TIME.) They experienced fewer problems with reading than with other language skills. These findings reflect conclusions reported in other studies that the problems of Asian or non-western foreign students is a distinct area of research as seen, and that students differ significantly by world region in linguistic adjustments to college life. As mentioned, competence in various foreign languages is important China as a developing country. Most important, perhaps, is competence in English. To develop this competence, improvements in the kinds of methodology needed to teach foreign language in schools in China should grow out of such studies as the present one.

The previous studies of foreign high school students as well as the other citations are indications of the level of proficiency achieved by students in vastly differing countries, representing different cultures, but learning English under fairly similar instructional conditions. Studies concerning the high school student have not appeared in the national research reviews on a matter of increasing professional attention, foreign language proficiency (oral and written skills, testing, teaching, curriculum, etc.) Yet, as James (1985) indicates, proficiency implies control of one's "personal and social environments by means of language..." Instruction is geared, James seems to remark, to helping others get the "greatest benefit from interaction with those environments, such as the school and street, the classroom and the board room, the casual conversation and prepared speech, wherever it was possible to acquire or learn the skills of the language."

(P.3) Since the development of the ACTFL/ETS Proficiency Guidelines, foreign students' proficiency in English is, eventually, measured and compared with American students' scores of similar instruments specified for the foreign language they are studying.

The general research problem in the study of Chinese graduate students, then, was the nature of their linguistic and cultural adjustment with regard to level of difficulty and as a reflection of their academic preparation in the English language in China. The study attempted to investigate the following sub-problems:

1. What relationships, if any, exist between length and difficulties of Chinese students' adjustment to total English immersion and their English language preparation in China?
2. What are the most common types of English instruction in China?
3. What are the most common kinds of immersion difficulties regarding the use of English?
4. With which groups of people in the host country do Chinese students have the most difficulty in the use of language and in cultural aspects.
5. What are the levels of difficulty experienced by Chinese students in the use of various language skills: speaking, understanding, reading and writing?
6. What perception do Chinese students have concerning the adequacy of their English language preparation at home relative to the conditions of total immersion and a smooth transition to the regular use of English for communication?
7. What are preferred types of instruction or preparation in English relative to a smooth adjustment to total immersion conditions?

The period of adjustment to total English immersion was defined as the number of weeks the student needed to feel at ease, in his/her own judgement, in most English speaking situations. Linguistic preparation in English was defined as: a) length of study of English in China; b) the types of English language instruction in home schools and the university, and; c) the linguistic orientation/competence of English language teachers in China.

The evidence reported thus far concerning Asian students' linguistic difficulties implies the need to ameliorate the instructional situation so as to facilitate students gaining more control over the language functions and, therefore, the communication context. Should the Chinese students demonstrate very similar patterns of language difficulty in adjusting to total immersion as well as similar patterns of instruction as

others from Japan have, this would lend strong support for suggestions about instructional modifications which Chinese English teachers may find worthy of consideration. Such results could, also, influence support for a broader study of both Chinese, Japanese and other Asian students to give greater validation to the methodology used in this study.

A group of 158 graduate Chinese students from two major universities in the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) were selected for the survey. Thirty-eight (38) students were from Nankai University in Tianjin, the rest were from Tianjin University. No attempt was made to differentiate between male and female students. For this replication study, we revised the questionnaire from the YOU survey (Gurney, 1984) in a number of ways. Obviously, China was the home country. Additional questions were put in to cover the fact that the students had received instruction from English teachers in both high school and college. Also, the American host population was different, and questions regarding difficulty of linguistic adjustment with various people reflected the college rather than the home/school context of the YFU study: "professors in the major" and "other professors" replaced "teachers" in the YFU questionnaire, and "native American student" substituted for "teenage American students."

The questionnaire contained questions mostly answered on a 4 point scale relative to the degree to which students had experienced certain types of English instruction in China, linguistic difficulty in the U.S., requested/received help with such difficulties, etc. as described in the questions. (Scale: 1 = NEVER, 2 = SOMETIMES, 3 = OFTEN, 4 = MOST OF THE TIME). There were, also, affirmation/negation questions, as well as others that will be explained in the report of findings as needed for clarity. We intended to have a survey on similar questions completed by a professor familiar with the language competence of each student. This matter is discussed below.

The questionnaires were mailed in early May 1989. The Chinese visiting scholar wrote a personally addressed letter in Chinese to accompany the instructions and research explanations in English. Students were asked to complete the survey instrument on their own, distribute a teacher form, and to return both completed questionnaires by the second week of June.

Of the 180 questionnaires mailed out, only 22 (12.2%) usable student forms were received. Only one teacher form was returned. An unexpected delay in the arrival of the visiting scholar resulted in the questionnaires being mailed, unfortunately, just prior to the time that Chinese students staged their June demonstration in Tianamen Square in Beijing. The subsequent government response may have influenced

a reluctance on the part of many of the students to respond to our questionnaire. In particular, none of the Nankai University students returned the survey instrument... Almost all of these were returned marked “incorrect address” or “no forward address.” This reference to the event in Tianamen Square is pertinent in assessing the low percentage of return. It was determined by a number of Chinese advisors that the students residing in the United States were probably very wary of revealing their locations, particularly since the personalized letter was from a member of the graduate administration of a national university. This level of return did not constitute a viable statistical sample for analysis, however, the report will detail the results with perceptions as to the potential significance of the findings.

FINDINGS

Major findings of this first study of Chinese graduate students begin with data on the students’ English background in China:

- 1) the majority of the students had almost 3 years of English (M=2.75 yrs.) Only about one third (31%) had 3 years or more of English;
- 2) the English teachers were primarily Chinese, but almost one quarter had teachers in high school or college (27.3% / 40.9%) from an English speaking country;
- 3) English was sporadically used for instruction in English classes (13.9 NEVER and SOMETIMES 50%);
- 4) translation was the primary mode of instruction (most often from English to Chinese: 50% OFTEN, 22.7% MOST OF TIME) with scant use of English to relate students’ activities (45.5% NEVER, 31.8% SOMETIMES); and,
- 5) there was a heavy concentration on memorizing English words with Chinese meanings (MOST OF TIME 45.5% OFTEN 27.3%).

On adjustment and linguistic difficulties, we found that: 1) the average length of time to become at ease in most speaking situations was 23.55 weeks. (However, one student reported 99 weeks for the adjustment period. A more realistic average is 17.5 weeks); 2) five students reported that they had yet adjusted during their stay in this country; 3) the rank order of linguistic difficulties was speaking, understanding, writing and reading; 4) students had less difficulty understanding and speaking with major professors than with other students as well; and, 5) the Chinese students requested and received more

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On the matter of total immersion conditions and prior English preparation in China, most students reported that this preparation was insufficient (72.7%), and 86.4% reported they had not gotten enough practice in conversation in order to make a smooth transition to using English on a daily basis. Almost as many (77%) thought that well developed skills in listening and comprehension were either VERY BENEFICIAL OR ESSENTIAL. Also, classroom instruction by native or near-native speakers of English was the highest rated academic preparation relative to the demands of total immersion in the United States (36.4% ESSENTIAL, 40.9% VERY BENEFICIAL.)

These perceptions are reinforced by the indications of the types of instruction most prevalent in the high schools and colleges in China: concentration on rules of grammar, translation from English to Chinese and memorization of English words with Chinese definitions. (As mentioned, ratings on the last two were generally very high: OFTEN/MOST OF TIME. Combined percentages: 72%.)

Although returns could not support highly accurate analyses, the validity of the Chinese students' responses was probably similar to that of the Japanese YFU students. One should be able to compare similar questions on linguistic preparation, adjustment and areas of difficulty between the two studies of Asian students. In this vein, the following are noteworthy.

A. The YFU STUDY had responses from 284 students, 73% more than the Chinese group (N = 22).

B. Findings

1. The Chinese students studied English for a shorter period of time in high school than the Japanese students ($M = 2.76$ vs 9 years), and had a larger percentage of natives as English teachers.
2. Neither group had studied other foreign languages with any regularity at all.
3. The mean period of adjustment was shorter for Japanese students than for the Chinese group ($M = 12.6$ vs 23.55 weeks, or 17.5 weeks with $N = 21$.)
4. The rank order of difficulties: speaking, understanding, writing and reading was a reverse of the findings in the YFU study.
5. The context for help was similar in terms of two response modes: OFTEN and MOST OF TIME.
6. The Chinese students felt as ill prepared for immersion as the Japanese students (72.7% / 75%), and reported that they had insufficient conversation as preparation for a smooth transition to the daily use of English (86.4% / 80%).
7. As to preferences in skills preparation, general skills in reading, writing and listening comprehension were ranked most beneficial by Chinese students ($M = 1.96$. Scale: 0 - 3), but extensive conversation, ranked first by YFU students, was close behind ($M = 1.86$) followed by a extensive vocabulary and a high level of reading ($M = 1.73$).
8. Ratings on beneficial academic preparation were, overall, lower than on skills preparation. The most beneficial in both studies was classroom instruction by natives or near native speakers of English followed by a combined English language/U.S. culture orientation in the U.S. before going on to the college/university.
9. Basic cultural empathy was rated higher by Japanese than by Chinese students on the most important cultural competence for members of the host country. The latter group rated basic awareness of Chinese culture the most desirable competence. They rated general cultural empathy second.

Suggestions based on this study are directed at the conditions of English instruction in China described above:

1. Include authentic English models and meaningful use of language as essential parts of all instruction;
2. Reading instruction should concentrate on contemporary materials from countries where English is a native language;
3. in the obvious absence of native or near native speakers of English as teachers, Chinese

instructors could allow for ample exposure to English speaking persons through mass media and tapes. In addition, students could be encouraged to utilize good English sentences (as contained in textbooks and other reading materials) as competencies by making statements about their own lives as variations of such basic sentences. Improvement can come as teachers and students, alike, experiment with communicating orally while increasing their exposure to native English models on television, radio, in films and on tapes; and,

4. Vocabulary words should be defined in English as often as possible to avoid the matching up of English words with Chinese meanings. Once students gain control of a fairly consistent vocabulary, they can be encouraged to use those words in order to associate new words when they have to look up the English definition, not Chinese translation, in standard English-only dictionary. Chinese translation should be used to gain the meaning of the definition if unknown English words reused to define the new words(s). In this way, English will be mastered in terms of English contexts, not in terms of Chinese meanings.

More valuable use could be made of all the human effort, motivation and intelligence spent on learning how English makes sense in terms of rules and Chinese meanings by using this energy and time to develop a viable, meaningful, competence in English. It is necessary for students who are going to study in the United States to have English training before coming here. Adjustment to total English immersion should take place much earlier for students who have been trained than for those who have not.

The key to using a language for communication is practice with the structures in which actual information about the speaker/writer and his/her world is being transmitted. As learners practice meaningful use of English with a few structures, their minds and bodies become accustomed to the rhythms that are natural to people who speak the language as natives. Control of a few rhythms contains the essence for learning to control all of the remaining structures. If Chinese instructors would allow for this kind of early use of English, their students could go beyond the limits imposed by present methodology, and the present goals of English education in China. Language is a tool of communication. Practice makes perfect, and students should have more opportunity to practice their English, especially talking to people whose native language is English. For example, it could be very useful to help students set up English clubs (which, in China, is called English Corner) where English could be spoken among the students. A different, enhanced,

perspective of English might be the fortuitous result of the suggested changes accompanied by an increase in actual English proficiency by Chinese students. Undoubtedly, Tianjin University, as well as other universities in China, will benefit from these findings both in terms of English difficulties that Chinese students may have and the suggested instructional background for total immersion.